

A/N: Hey everybody. Here's the prologue for the sequel of The Denarian Renegade. As you'll be able to tell straight away from this prologue, it features a lot more of the White Council and in up and coming chapters, the Red Court Vampires. I've also started a Forum on my profile to answer any questions about this story and the last, so feel free to query me, because you can all help me avoid falling into plot holes. That said, I'll only answer you if it won't give away too much about the plot

Readers and fans, welcome to the first chapter of "The Denarian Knight"

Deep within the very heart of Scotland stood a majestic school, its spires soaring out into the night sky and straining to touch the thousands of bright stars. The large lake rippled as a soft wind blew through the valley and the dark, foreboding trees of the Forbidden Forest turned and twisted. Thousands of twinkling lights sparkled from the castle's windows and the castle's appearance seemed to reflect the atmosphere of the students within. Inside the Great Hall sat hundreds of laughing and chatting students, beaming smiles on their face as they reached for the scrumptious food that lined the tables.

Despite recent tensions, the mood in the hall was relaxed and cheerful. Up at the staff table, the Headmaster watched the proceedings with twinkling eyes, one gnarled hand stroking his long beard. The prim and proper Transfiguration professor was chatting to a very upbeat Charms Professor. The new Defence Professor was watching the hall with a sweet smile and cold eyes, her mind carefully analysing every suspicious movement and noting in the back of her head for later use. The entire scene was disturbed when the Great Hall doors creaked open and a figure slipped in.

At first the intruder remained unnoticed by most of the occupants of the Great Hall. However, Dumbledore immediately swivelled his gaze up, not looking surprised at all as a benign smile crossed his face. Dumbledore's action caused the students to swivel their heads and a loud buzz of whispers burst from all over the hall as the intruder took a step forward, wary green eyes seeing all.

“Welcome back to Hogwarts, Harry Potter,” Dumbledore greeted.

Harry didn't say a word as he limped his way up the hall. His face was blank but his eyes were furious and stormy and his hands remained hidden under his long, black coat. Suddenly, Dumbledore frowned and for a split-second his eyes flickered up as a grey blur shot from the door towards Harry. Harry tried to whirl around but the blur slammed into him, tacking him to the ground.

The blur of grey revealed itself to be a large Germanic man with grey hair pulled back in a ponytail and a craggy, sour face. The man, dressed in a dark grey cloak, gave a low growl as he wove a hand through Harry's hair and yanked the boy's head upwards. An instant, there was a flash of silver and the blade of a broadsword was pressed against Harry's throat, making Harry hiss with rage as he yanked his head back as far as he could. Harry's hands slipped out of his coat, revealing an elaborate pair of bindings slapped across them.

Harry came not as a guest but as a prisoner.

“Hey, Dumbledore?” Harry said slowly, licking his lips nervously as he knelt in the middle of the Great Hall. Students closest to the grey-cloaked man gave startled yells and screams and scrambled back as Dumbledore stiffened, his light blue eyes eying the cloaked-man with recognition. “Remember how I helped you with that thing not too long ago? Well, I'm going to need you to repay the favour...”

“Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts,” The grey-cloaked man intoned loudly, his voice carrying out through the hall. “By order of the White Council, the one known as Harry Potter has been scheduled for execution. Only you can spare his life now...”

“Fucking git,” Harry mumbled.

A/N: Heya . There were a lot of concerns about Harry become Dumbledore's, for lack of a better word, bitch. Let me assure you that I know all about the cliché's and am working hard to avoid falling into them. That said, it wouldn't really be a Harry Potter story if Harry wasn't involved in the events that revolve around Hogwarts. That also said, there's also a lot of original stuff in here that's unique to the story. I've laid the plot out to take the best of both worlds, so I hope you enjoy it.

The prologue was only a teaser, so here's what has happened in the months before.

Four Months Earlier

The man was one of many in a sea of black cloaks and white masks. He kept his eyes forward, although he, like the rest of his kind, could not help but flick them towards their guest for that evening. A very beautiful and voluptuous woman idly stretched herself, revealing a generous portion of her assets as the soft, slinky dress ran over her creamy skin. Smoky blue eyes flickered with an inner darkness, a fiery tinge of red-yellow flashing through them every so often and a self-satisfied smirk crossed over her face as she listened.

"So, we are agreed...?" A voice hissed and the man shuddered. He was not cold, despite the icy wind that had shot through the small gathering, but the sound of his Master's voice always brought a wave of fresh fear, something his Master found terribly amusing. Despite himself, the man glanced past the woman and gazed upon his Master's form.

Crimson eyes flared as the Dark Lord absently twirled his wand in his spindly, pale hands. The Dark Lord's slit-like nostrils flared as another breeze howled past the spiked and jagged rocks and his pale, bald head automatically swivelled to the right as a seagull let out a sorrowful cry. The man shuddered again, this time at the memory of the horrible events of the Third Task. He had thought that the Dark Lord would not survive such terrible injuries. However, it seemed that the Heir of Slytherin possessed many powers that the man could only dream of and now, two months later, the Dark lord was recover and quickly coming closer to regaining his former power.

"We are agreed," The woman said in a soft voice, licking her lips and smiling coldly. She took the Dark Lord by the hand and his crimson eyes flashed as she sensually rubbed her thumb over it, her voice lowering and becoming husky as she continued. "Working together, Lord Voldemort, we will be unstoppable. Working together, those who dare to oppose us will fall beneath our feet. Working together..."

"Harry Potter will die!" The Dark Lord hissed and suddenly the sea of Death Eater's were cheering and applauding. Figures lurked in the background and the man swallowed nervously, his applause dying out as he caught the glimpse of a horrible, lion-like creature with glowing yellow eyes. He quickly swung his eyes back at his Master, noting that there was almost a tangible field of dark magic hovering around the two leaders as the Dark Lord and the Denarian Queen finalised their alliance...

"Son of a..." Harry gasped and shot up from his bed. He opened his eyes and groaned, quickly shutting them as his body let him know that this interruption to its sleep cycle was not appreciated. "What the hell was that?"

'That, beloved, was both very interesting and very disturbing,' Came the smooth, melodious voice of his Fallen. Meciél's presence within his mind seemed to throb with anxiety as she sent tendrils of warmth shooting through his body, driving away his fatigue in a single blast. 'I recognised that woman.'

"Of course you did," Harry muttered and gave a tired yawn. He sleepily glanced at a cheap wind-up clock resting on his wall and scowled. "Oh, for the love of....it's six in the morning! Somebody's balls are going to get busted for this."

'Of course, beloved,' Meciél said patiently. 'Although I thought that you might be a little more interested in the reason behind that vision you just experienced.'

"What, that was a vision?" Harry asked, a curious expression washing over his face. "Why the hell did I have a vision? Hey, am I seer? And

if I can, is there anyway I can somehow get next week's lottery numbers?"

'No, beloved, you are not a seer,' Meciél explained. Harry felt a cool sensation brushing against his left cheek, from chin to brow. Harry knew without looking in a mirror that a wicked-looking scar had been carved there, courtesy of a Death Eater no less than two months ago. He frowned and touched the scar with his fingers, blinking in surprise as a slither of pain ran through him. 'It came from this scar.'

"The scar?" Harry said sceptically.

'The scar,' Meciél agreed. 'It is a curse scar, much like the one on your forehead. I naturally block that scar to ensure your safety but I will admit that I was not prepared to defend against this intrusion until it had already started, and by then I realised just what I was looking at.'

"Wait," Harry said slowly, a frown appearing on his face. "I got a vision...because some shithead gave me a scar? Is that even possible?"

'Normally, for wounds such as this then no,' Meciél explained. 'In fact, I have never heard of such a detailed vision appearing before in all of my experience.'

"So, what gives?" Harry asked slowly.

'I am unsure, beloved. I can speculate, if you wish me to,' Meciél answered.

"Speculate away," grumbled Harry, sighing and shaking his head dejectedly. A moment later he jumped out of bed, wincing with his bare feet hit the cold ground. An instant later the cold sensation disappeared as Meciél numbed his feet. Harry shuffled out of his bedroom and towards the kitchen, his eyes glazed over as he listened.

'Considering the nature of the wound, as a necessary ingredient in a powerful ritual, it is not impossible that the normal residual link

has...mutated,' Meciél said slowly. 'As you are aware, Curse Scars are the result of residual dark magic forming a connection of sorts between the victim and the attacker. Depending on the severity of the curse, this connection will normally dissipate after a period of time, say, from mere seconds to a few hours after the attack. However, there have been reports when victims of dark curses have formed a permanent link with their attacker. The victims report that there are times when the curse scar will cause them pain when their attacker is nearby and feeling a very strong emotion. There have been a few cases where the victim once saw flashes of that their attacker was doing at one particular moment.'

"This was a little more than a flash, Meciél," Harry said, absently grabbing a chipped bowl from the cupboard and reaching for the box of cereal. "A flash is like when an actress pulls a 'nipple-slip' on TV. This was like an actress releasing an entire homemade sex-tape."

'I am astounded in your ability to steer every subject back towards sex,' Meciél said dryly. 'You are right, though. This was far greater than anything I have heard about. Like I said, it is possible that this connection has grown far greater than it normally would have because of the situations that surround its creation. There was a lot of raw, dark magic in the graveyard that night.'

"So I have a link with that Death Eater, what's-his-face, Tapeworm or wombtail or something?" Harry asked, shuffling the cereal box and pouring it into his bowl.

'I believe his name was Wormtail,' Meciél remarked in amusement.

"So, what did you think of the vision?" Harry asked, frowning and absently squashing a cockroach that had been hiding in his cereal. He looked at the rest of it in distaste and sighed. "Fucking hell, I can't even get a decent breakfast."

'The woman who was allying herself with Voldemort, she is a Denarian,' Meciél answered and a flash of hatred swept through Harry, who raised his eyebrows in interest. 'It is Vesper, one of the most powerful of the Denarian Warlords.'

“Useful information,” Harry remarked as he emptied the bowl of cereal into the bin. “What should we do about this link?”

‘I can maintain a constant block on it and you will never receive another vision again,’ Meciell offered. ‘However, if you wish, I can maintain the block but allow any tangible vision to filter through. Like you said, we can learn some very useful information here.’

“Eh, just block it and tell me if something useful comes up,” Harry shrugged and took a deep breath, his eyes scanning his shelves for something else to eat. “So, why does Vesper want me dead?”

‘Vesper and I have never been allies,’ Meciell remarked and Harry sensed a streak of cruel satisfaction coming from her. ‘She is a rival, for lack of a better word. With Nicodemus dead, I assume that the Order of Blackened Denarius is in turmoil, with the most powerful Denarian’s fighting for the right to rule. Vesper would naturally want to kill the competition, especially considering that we defeated Nicodemus.’

“Is she powerful?”

‘Quite,’ Meciell answered. ‘But not to the level of Nicodemus, the Drakon or Azzeh. You yourself will far outstrip her as you grow further into your powers. I believe that you could hold your own if you were to encounter her.’

“Great, just fucking great.” Harry sighed in annoyance, rolling his eyes. “Another enemy.”

‘I believe that you will have quite the advantage over her,’ Meciell murmured and Harry’s eyes were drawn to his living room. He had eventually replaced most of the furniture he had smashed upon his return and had chipped in for a small, cheap mantelpiece. Lying on this mantelpiece was a gleaming polished walking stick. Harry knew from experience that the head of the walking stick was actually the hilt of a cleverly disguised sword.

It had only been a few months since Harry had been deemed as worthy enough to be blessed as a Knight of the Cross. Harry still

wasn't sure if this was one of God's fucked up version of humour or if somebody up there had made a really bad administration error. Either way, Harry found the sword both useful and at the same time, very annoying. The former because the sword was without doubt one of the most powerful weapons he had ever used. It was capable of reflecting or negating all magical-based attacks, could flare up silver flames and gave him the ability to avoid attacks in the most uncanny of manners. There was a time when Harry had slammed the sword down on a chair and a piece of the shrapnel had actually hit a bullet that had been aimed at him, veering it off course just enough to save his life. Of course, there were some drawbacks. Harry had to wear gloves before he could even touch the sword. As a Denarian, his exposed flesh had a tendency to sizzle, blister and burn whenever his bare skin came into contact with any part of the holy weapon. The second drawback of owning the sword was occurring at that very moment.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Harry growled angrily. He glared at the sword in the most petulant manner he could muster. "No! Not today, not before I've had breakfast. Go call one of the other Knights! I've got better things to do!"

Harry turned away as something tugged at his heart, knowing that it had nothing to do with his emotions. Every once in a while, Harry would get these feelings, as if it was vitally important that he be somewhere. The first time, Harry had ignored it for four days straight before he had inadvertently stumbled onto the very scene he was trying to avoid, just in time to stop a homeless man being eaten alive by a Troll under a bridge. It was almost as if the sword knew how long it would take for him to relent and sent the warnings in advance.

"I said no," Harry snapped at the sword, crossing his arms and heaving with a frustrated sigh.

'I don't think the sword can understand you, beloved,' Meciell said, partly in amusement and partly in wariness. She had been unable to block these feelings Harry was having, much to her disgust. 'It is, after all, an inanimate object.'

“Hey, there are inanimate objects that are smarter than the people I know,” Harry muttered with a scowl on his face. “Hell, a most of them are a lot more attractive.”

‘That’s not very nice,’ Meciell said and paused. ‘Of course, it sounds accurate.’

“Remember the last time that stupid sword dragged me out,” Harry grumbled, throwing the sword a dirty look. “That prostitute I saved had the face of a frog, slimy and bulbous.”

The tugging at his heart continued, more intently this time, and Harry sighed.

‘Remember,’ Meciell remarked dryly. ‘God’s power is matched only by his stubbornness. I had an argument with him once and he threw out and hasn’t talked to me since.’

Harry ignored her as he pulled his wand out of his pocket. With a sharp flick, one of the battered armchairs soared from the corner of the living room. Harry flicked his wand again and summoned a book from the one and only bookshelf. It landed in his hands and Harry glanced at the title ‘Transfiguration: Why Owls become Toads’ and sat down.

After a few minutes of browsing the book, Harry finally growled and slammed the book down onto the ground, a furious expression on his face.

“Alright, alright,” He snarled, standing up and glaring at the sword. “I’m going, I’m going, just give me a fucking break already.”

Instantaneously, the tugging at his heart stopped and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment he was tempted to shout something along the lines of ‘sucker’ and sit back down again but he knew from personal experience that the summons would only return in full force.

“I should find a way to destroy the bloody thing,” Harry muttered curtly under his breath as he strode into his bedroom. In a few moments he was dressed in his clothes, long black coat and all, and he walked out

of the bedroom and over to the mantelpiece, his eyes glittering with annoyance.

'You did say that the power of this weapon would be worth the occasional side-trip,' Meciél reminded him as he took a deep breath and, with gloved hands, took hold of the sword. Instantly, a location flashed in his mind, somewhere he had never been before but somewhere where he would somehow be able to apparate there perfectly.

"Yeah, that was a month ago," Harry remarked sourly. "Having been killed nearly seven times since then, I reserve the right to change my mind."

'Well, it's a bit late for that now, isn't it?' Meciél asked and Harry felt a flash of smugness radiate from her presence.

"Oh, shut up with the 'I told you so'," Harry muttered and took a deep breath readying himself to apparate. His eyes flickered to the roof of the house and he glowered. "Watch yourself, big-man, or one day I might burn down St Peter's Cathedral, just for fun."

Without another word, Harry twirled on his feet and disappeared from the apartment with a small pop.

He reappeared in a small, dark alleyway somewhere in a large city. Buildings loomed above and around his head, giant towers of twinkling lights in the darkness. Wherever he was, it was the middle of the night. As soon as he had arrived, a small crack had shot through the alleyway and gained the attention of the three other occupants, including one terrified-looking man clad in an expensive suit and two handsome blonde men looming above him. The two blonde men sprung around, their eyes narrowed as they took in the newcomer while the man in the suit staggered backwards, trying unsuccessfully to find a way out of the dead-end alley.

"Well, well, well," One of the men drawled, his blue eyes flickering over Harry. He was dressed in casual but expensive clothes. "What do we have here, brother?"

"Where did you come from, little boy?" The other man demanded, his eyes narrowing suspiciously as he stared at Harry. Harry blinked and stared back at him, assessing both men carefully. He gripped both his cane and his wand under his coat and prepared himself.

"Never mind that, brother," The other man cut in smoothly, smiling politely and showing gleaming white teeth. "We were just about to eat. Would you care to join us?"

Harry smiled back, his face a picture of cheerfulness, but his words were cold and curt. "Yeah, it'll be a cold day in hell before I let a Red Court Vampire take a nibble on my neck."

The man's smile disappeared and his eyes widened in astonishment, while his brother bared his suddenly long teeth and curved his suddenly sharp nails. Harry made a loud scoffing noise and looked unimpressed as he pulled out cane and wand.

"Argentum telum!" Harry barked and oily smoke rose from the glowing runes on his wand as a piercing bolt of glowing silver formed into the shape of an arrowhead and shot forward with the force of a bullet.

A normal human being would have been instantly killed but these two men were no mere humans and both of them dived to the side, moving as a blur. The spell glanced one of their shoulders and suddenly the air was filled with an eerie screech of pain. The injured vampire fell to the ground, thrashing and clutching his bloodied shoulder, where a large chunk seemed to have been scooped out.

For a moment the vampire's skin rippled and it was as if he was literally wearing the skin of a human. Harry got glimpses of a creature of darkness, with oily, saggy skin and thing, bony arms, before the other vampire rushed towards him, jumping forward with incredible speed and power and covering a dozen metres in a mere second.

"Evertoxuro!" Harry barked out, thrusting his wand forward. Billowing clouds of smoke flooded into the air as a torrent of flames exploded from his wand, sweeping forward and burning everything in sight. The

vampire, however, ducked under the flames and launched itself at Harry.

‘Look out!’

Harry moved faster than he would have thought possible, sidestepping and bringing the cane up above his head. As the Vampire sailed past, Harry slammed the wooden sheath down on the vampire's back and gave a dark smile as he heard the creature give a grunt of pain and staggered to the ground. With a twist of his wrist, the sword fell out of the sheath and suddenly the alley was bathed with silver light. With a snarl of anger, Harry slammed the holy sword down into the vampire's exposed back, his eyes glittering as the vampire screeched in pain and exploded in a flash of silver flames.

Suddenly the other vampire was there, his face contorting and twisting as the inner beast of the vampire raged at the death of its companion. Harry grunted as the vampire slammed his fist down on Harry's arm and his muscles reflexively convulsed, the sword dropping from his hands. The vampire moved in a single blurred movement and Harry's vision exploded with light as a fist with superhuman strength slammed into his jaw.

The next thing Harry knew, he was lying on the ground with a snarling creature dressed in human skin on top of him. Blazing anger and icy cold fear rushed through him as he gritted his teeth. His wand was thrown from his hand and the vampire bared its elongated teeth, its eyes completely black.

“I will enjoy feeding on you, wizard!” It snarled in obvious pleasure.

Harry snarled back at it wordlessly and lashed out with his hand, slamming his fist into the creature's face. The creature hissed but accepted the blow, its grin widening as the human skin contorted around its face. With a loud, hacking noise, the vampire spat a huge glob of saliva on Harry's face. The moment the saliva touched Harry's skin, he knew he was in trouble.

At one point, Harry had been subjugated to an extremely powerful compulsion charm called the Imperius Curse. Before Meciél had

shielded him, Harry had felt a sensation of absolute bliss and carefree paradise, where there was no pain, no suffering and no anger. The venom of the Red Court vampire worked in much the same way, apart from two distinctions. Firstly, it worked on a purely biological basis. The sensations Harry was feeling now were because of a drug that made heroin look like vitamin C tablets. This was worse for Harry because, unlike the mental intrusion of a spell, it was much harder for Meciél to fight. Secondly, along with this sensation of bliss came with it a cascading wave of unending pleasure that threatened to drag Harry's mind down into its depths and surround him forever. It was little wonder why the Red Court vampire usually had very little trouble in capturing prey.

The sensations of bliss slammed into him with the subtlety of a tank, hurling itself at his mental barriers. Harry's groaned, partly in anger and partly in pleasure as his entire body began to tingle with extreme pleasure and he shuddered, a cold sensation crawling down his neck as the vampire laughed, sensing his opponent's weakness.

'Now!' Meciél commanded.

Suddenly the sensation that had threatened to overtake Harry lessened, much of it swept away in a blast of pure heat. At the same time as Meciél dispelled what she could of the venom's effects, Harry initiated the first stages of his demonic transformation. From his back came two dragon-like wings of sharp, ashen bone, which lanced forward and impaled the vampire on each shoulder. The vampire screamed in agony as Harry lifted the creature off his chest and suspended him in the air. He flicked his wrist, fury shining in his eyes, and his wand soared back into his outstretched hand.

"Frendo!" Harry hissed, Hellfire rushing through him, and a dark flash of purple light exploded from his wand with a deafening boom. The vampire disappeared under the powerful pulverising curse, turning into a light spray of red mist and a few chunks of steaming meat.

The fight was over.

Harry grimaced as he stood up, wiping the dribble of vampire saliva off his face and staring at it on his gloved hands. With a sigh of

disgust, Harry bent down and wiped it on the ground as he picked up the sword, sliding it back into the wooden cane and standing back up.

‘That was very close,’ Meciél said grimly.

“Tell me about it,” Harry muttered and touched his face again, a disgusted expression on his face. “Did that guy seem like a rapist to you? He seemed like a rapist to me. I almost got raped by a vampire.”

“W-w-what the hell is g-going on?” Came a frightened and demanding voice from across the alley. Harry blinked and stared at the suited man who he had just saved.

“You know, vampire drool costs you extra,” He said grouchy and paused, lifting his eyes to the night sky as he mentally calculated something. When he was done, he gave a short assertive nod and stared at the man. “So, that’s six hundred and fifty bucks you owe me.”

“W-what?” The man exploded in a mixture of fear, confusion and anger. “What for? What’s going on? Who are you?”

“I saved your life from vampires,” Harry said slowly, as if the man were a touch slow in the head. “Hence, you owe me six hundred and fifty bucks. Cash, preferably.”

“Wha- vampires don’t exist!” The man snapped, breathing harshly as he stared at Harry in fear. Harry got the feeling that he hadn’t really seen much of what had just happened.

Pity. The sceptics were always cheapskates.

“Sure they do,” Harry said and prodded the meaty remains of one of the vampires with his shoe. “These were the classic Red Court vampire and you were the classic Red Court meal.”

“R-Red Court?” The man stumbled, looking even more lost. “What the hell are you talking about? What the hell is going on? What is the Red Court? Where did that fire come from? Where those two guys and...oh my God are, is that from a person!”

The man was staring down at the meaty remains with a horrified expression on his face. Harry rolled his eyes and sighed.

"No, it's from a vampire," He snapped in irritation. "And the Red Court is a hierarchy for a specific type of vampire. They actually look like some kind of freaky bat-thing with wrinkly, black skin and a smell like you wouldn't believe, but they like to dress up in human glamour's, it makes it easier to catch their prey."

"You...killed...vampires," The man said slowly, staring at Harry as if he wasn't sure which one of them was the most insane. "Vampires are real. And you killed them."

"Yes, I killed them, dumbarse," Harry snapped and rolled his eyes. "They got the usual vampire things going for them. Sunlight, silver, holy water, garlic, fire. They're not too hard to kill when you can get them lined up in your sights."

"I-I don't believe what I'm hearing," The man said and shook his head in despair. He gave a desperate little chuckle and sank to his knees. "I'm cracked, I've finally cracked."

"Oh, for the love of..." Harry snarled and fingered his wand, narrowing his eyes and wondering what curse he might apply to the moron in front of him. "My money. Give it to me."

"Why?" The man asked in such a calm, frank tone that Harry blinked.

"Look, moron, everybody needs to earn their rent," He snapped. "Robbing places is a bad idea for me at the moment, so I'm doing the whole hero thing, except I'm getting a little extra incentive on the side. Now, give me the wallet or I'll slam you over the head and take it from you."

"Fine," The man snorted and reached into his suit. He pulled out a small, leather-bound wallet and threw it at Harry. Harry snatched it from the air and opened it up. A frown appeared on his face as he pulled out all of the notes and he sighed in annoyance.

"This is two hundred and thirty two bucks," Harry snapped with an annoyed glare. He swung his piercing green eyes over the man and stopped at the man's wrist. With a flick of his wand, Harry summoned the watch on the man's wrist to his hand.

"How did you..." The man started, before he blinked. "Right. Killer of vampires. Of course you have super powers."

"Is this Swiss?" Harry asked in curiosity.

"Yeah," The man mumbled, still staring at Harry in astonishment. "It was my anniversary parent from my kids."

"This should pick up the extra cost," Harry said and pocketed the money and the watch. He stared down at the man, who seemed as if he had just had a breakdown, and frowned. "I don't have to tell you not to tell anybody, because, frankly, who's going to believe you anyway? I mean, you could tell somebody if you have a thing for horse tranquilisers, the kind the give you in the nuthouse, if you catch my drift."

The man blinked and stared at him as Harry motioned for him to stand. Slowly, the man climbed to his feet and staggered out of the alley with a dazed expression on his face. Harry watched him go and pursed his lips, shaking his head.

"That guy has problems," he remarked.

The sword in his hand suddenly seemed to glow, basking Harry in a soft silvery light that throbbed in what he interpreted as a reproaching manner.

"Oh, stop your whining," Harry scowled. "I saved his life, didn't I? Besides, I need to get something out of this, especially since you dragged me out here before seven in the morning."

'So, beloved, what next?'

“That, Meciél, is an excellent question,” Harry said and tucked his wand and cane under his coat. “I was thinking some breakfast and then another twelve hours of sleep.”

‘Don’t forget that you have a meeting with a Harry Dresden today,’ Meciél reminded him and Harry let out a sigh.

“Fuck,” He muttered and gave an annoyed sigh. “Welcome back sleep-deprivation, my very old friend. Mind the sore jaw, somebody punched me there today. Not that anybody cares.”

‘I care, beloved.’

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Harry grumbled but an affectionate smile flickered across his face. “So, you up for some breakfast?”

‘As long as we stay away from fried eggs,’ Meciél said firmly.

“I don’t understand why you don’t like them,” Harry said with a puzzled expression. “I mean, all of your senses come through mine and I like them, so don’t you have to like them by default or something?”

‘This is going to be a long morning, isn’t it?’ Meciél asked with a weary sigh.

“If I’m awake before ten then count on it,” Harry said with a nasty smile.

A/N: Once again, I want to remind everybody that I am not using Butcher's concept of a Soul gaze. Mainly because, like last time, it's not relevant to the story at all and I don't want to introduce a new topic. For those who know what I'm talking about, sorry if this upsets you. For those who don't, don't worry about it. For both groups, enjoy the chapter.

McAnally's was a small diner in the middle on the centred on the outskirts of a busy Chicago street. The entrance had been placed in a way that whenever somebody walked in, they had to take several steps down into a room with a potentially lethal combination of a low clearance and ceiling fans. There were thirteen stools at the bar and thirteen tables in the room. There were thirteen windows set up high into the wall that allowed some light to filter in from the street and thirteen small mirrors had been placed on the wall, making the diner seem a lot bigger than it really was. Thirteen thick wooden columns were located in random places around the room, carved with intricate mythical, and not so mythical, creatures, making it hard to walk around the place. Everything in the room had been strategically placed to restrict the flow of magic in the room. The diner's strange layout, combined with a sign on the wall just inside the door that proclaimed, ACCORDED NEUTRAL TERRITORY, made McAnally's a popular haven for the various two-bit supernaturally-inclined of the city.

There were about two dozen or so diners chatting and muttering to each other in friendly voices when Harry walked in, a perpetual scowl on his face. He barely took notice of the sign hanging on the wall and ducked to avoid a ceiling fan as he stomped down the stairs, apparently talking to himself quite animatedly.

"I'm just saying," Harry protested, coming to the bottom of the stairs and walking towards the bar. "It's a big world out there."

The patron of the bar, Mac, looked up at Harry with a squinted gaze. He was a tall, almost gangly man of the age where he looked as if he could be anywhere between thirty and seventy. He didn't speak much, which Harry found to be a valued trait, and was never disconcerted by the strange happenings in his bar.

"A steak and ale," Harry ordered without stopping, his eyes resting briefly on Mac. "And put it on Dresden's tab. He's a regular here, right?"

Mac grunted and stared at Harry stonily, folding his arms over his chest with a stern expression clouding his features. Harry stared back with a challenging lift of his eyebrow but Mac was unmoved and Harry sighed, rolling his eyes in defeat.

"Just give me something to drink," He muttered.

Mac grunted and reached under the bar for a bottle of soft-drink. He hurled it at Harry, who easily caught it, and moved towards the old wood-burning stove while Harry took a seat next to one of the wooden columns, seemingly ignoring the strange and wary, stares he was getting.

"Well, I was thinking somewhere tropical," Harry replied after a moment. He raised his eyebrows and turned his eyes towards the chair next to him as there was somebody actually sitting there. "You've been around the world, you should know about all of the good places."

Some of the diners shifted in their seats and a pair of middle-aged women stood up and quickly left as Harry frowned, folding his arms over his chest petulantly.

"No, that's no good," He grumbled. "That warlock is still pissed at you."

A few of the other diners also put down their forks and left the diner as Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have cut off his arms. He probably would have given you a refund anyway," He muttered. After a moment's pause he let out a deep breath and a scowl appeared on his face. "Hey, don't get snippy with you, I'm just saying...you know what, forget maybe I'll ask..."

Harry glanced around at the room and stood up. He clapped his hands together once and was rewarded when the bar went completely silent, the diners staring at Harry with blank faces.

“Hey, does anybody know of a good travel agent?” Harry asked with a puzzled expression.

The bar was completely silent and Harry blinked, noting how many of the people were looking uncomfortable.

“Okay then,” He drawled slowly. “Be a bunch of tossers then.”

He sat back down just as the other half of the diners stood up and shuffled their way to the exit, many throwing Harry wary looks as they walked past. A few moments later, Harry was pretty much alone in the diner. A smug smile curved his lips as he watched them leave and he let out a sigh of satisfaction.

“It’s good to see that I’ve still got it,” He remarked and glanced back over at the chair. This time, he could actually see somebody sitting there as Meciél manipulated his brain to produce a visual representation of her figure for his eyes.

“You are incorrigible,” Meciél said, although a small smile crossed her beautiful face. Her silvery eyes watched Harry with an almost-unseen expression of affection and her long black hair swayed, as if the fans were actually moving it. She was clothed in a very delicate and very beautiful white and silver dress and wore a necklace of glittering diamonds across her chest.

“No, you’re inco-rabity-babity,” Harry shot back challengingly. There was a pause as Meciél blinked, her expression not changing for an instant.

“Don’t know how to say the word properly?” Meciél inquired.

“Nope,” Harry drawled slowly and shot her a clearly-mocking look of sadness. “Remember Meciél, I’m challenged. Use small words.” He held his fingertips apart for emphasis.

"I do not need you to tell me about the sad state of your mental faculties," Meciél said and with a glimmer of amusement. "Remember, beloved, I live in your brain. I experience them every single day."

"Whoa," Harry said, throwing his hands out and stopping Meciél before she could go any further. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. "Let's not make this personal."

"You started it," was all Meciél said.

Harry gave a mocking sigh of sadness and shook his head.

"And to think, you're my 'responsible' adult role model," Harry muttered. "It's a wonder that I've turned out right at all."

Meciél let out a soft snort and Harry chuckled at the disgruntled look on her face. He glanced up and saw Mac place a plate of steaming food on the counter. With a sigh, he stood up and walked across the room.

"Have you ever thought of hiring out some waiters or something?" Harry asked the balding barkeeper, who stared back at him with a stony expression on his face. "You don't have to pay them much. Just grab a few Mexicans or something, that way; you can pay them in bread."

"Eat your food," Mac said gruffly and turned away, busying himself in cleaning one of the glasses with a rag.

Harry rolled his eyes and took his place, walking back to his table and sitting down. As he did, Meciél blinked and simultaneously, the two of them swivelled their heads around to see a new arrival entering the diner.

He was a tall, lean man with wearied brown eyes and dark, messy hair. He had hawkish nose and a sharp chin, clothed in a long black duster and a pair of dark jeans, the man strode down the stairs, his wary eyes scanning the entire room before falling on Harry. Harry noted a slim rod hanging from the man's waist and his suspicions were confirmed. It was a blasting rod. So, this was the True-Wizard,

Harry Dresden. Almost instantly, Harry ducked his gaze and waited as the man walked across the room and paused over his table.

“Okay, I’m going to be honest with you,” The man said slowly, his smooth baritones rolling over his tongue. “I was expecting somebody a little older, considering your reputation.”

“And I’m going to be honest with you,” Harry retorted and gestured to the steaming steak in front of him. “See this meal? You’re paying for it. Now that we’ve got the small talk out of the way...”

Dresden ignored him as he scanned the room, a slight frown appearing on his face.

“Where is everybody?” He murmured, more to himself than Harry. “Usually this place is full about this time of a day.”

“It’s amazing what people will do to go to lengths to avoid a person talking to themselves,” Harry shrugged and paused, a wicked smile coming over his face. “Well, it was either that or I left a bad impression the last time I was here. Strangely enough, they’re all convinced that I’m some kind of a serial killer.”

Dresden blinked and regarded Harry carefully, not letting an iota of his true feelings show on his face. He looked at the seat that Harry gestured to and, with deliberate ease, took the one opposite it. Harry blinked as Dresden settled into the chair and stared at Harry impassively.

“You don’t have to be a paranoid fuck,” Harry mumbled under his breath but Dresden must have heard him.

“Paranoid?” Dresden exclaimed. He paused and then conceded. “Probably. But just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that there isn’t an invisible demon about to eat your face.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly, staring at Dresden strangely. “I don’t know where that came from...I probably don’t want to know, either. You know, you’d get along great with this wizard I know, if he weren’t dead and all. I mean, he was pretending to be somebody else for the

better part of the year, but some of that must have come from his true heart."

"Okay," Dresden said slowly. "I don't think I want to know either."

"Eh, suit yourself," Harry said and popped the top off his bottle of his drink. He took a swig and leaned back in his chair, hiding any anxiety or anticipation he may have felt and waiting for Dresden to continued.

"So...Denarian, huh?" Dresden said awkwardly after a few moments had passed.

"Yep," Harry answered in the same tone, eying Dresden carefully.

"How's that working for you?" Dresden asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Harry blinked.

"Eh, not too bad," He answered, making a shaky motion with his hand. "She can get snippy about the rent, though."

"Believe me, I know how that is," Dresden mumbled and Harry gave him a strange look. Dresden picked up on the look and hesitated, a painful expression crossing his face. "Personal experience."

"Who was it?" Harry asked in surprise, staring at the True-Wizard in front of him carefully and searching for any sign of a lingering, Fallen presence.

"Lasciel?" Dresden answered and Harry could have sworn he heard traces of sadness in the man's voice.

"The temptress herself?" Harry asked with interest and leant forward. "How is that manipulative slut, anyway?"

"Well, she did a brief prison stint in my basement for a few years," Dresden answered.

"Huh," Harry muttered lightly, although Meciell gave off a flash of pure amusement. "Bet that was fun. So, what, you really buried her?"

"Yeah," Dresden answered with a nod. "Buried, cemented, the whole works. I gave the coin to the Knights a while after. I really don't think she liked that."

"Your skills in empathy are truly outstanding," Harry remarked dryly and took a bite out of his steak. As usual, the meat was absolutely delicious and Harry tucked in.

"Yeah and I make a mean martini," Dresden said lightly.

"Really?" Harry asked sceptically and was rewarded as Dresden paused.

"Well, no," Dresden admitted, casting an envious look at Harry's lunch. "Not really."

Harry paused, giving them the other man an odd look. Noting the look at his steak, Harry smirked and took a delicious bite, enjoying the way Dresden's jaw clenched as he followed the young Denarian's movements.

"Then why would you say you can?" Harry asked with an exaggerated motion with his hands.

"It's called being a smart-arse," Dresden offered helpfully. "I'd offer you to try it out but I can see that you've got some practical experience in it already."

"Okay," Harry drawled and paused to take a sip of his drink. "So, are we going to get down to business anytime soon or should I," and here he paused and emphasised his English accent. "Go and get the crumpets so we may have a spot to eat. Maybe we can talk about Mr Biggleworth's delectable daughter. I tell you, sir, she is one saucy bitch."

"Yeah, definitely have some practical experiences," Dresden chuckled and adopted a wounded expression on his face. "And here I

was thinking that we were just getting to know one another, a real bonding experience.”

“Well,” Harry said slowly, making a deliberate show to shuffle a little further away from the True Wizard. “You don’t sound like a rapist or anything.”

“Nah,” Dresden scoffed, waving the comment off with his hand. “If I was a rapist I would say something like ‘nice underwear you’ve got on today, but tomorrow, can you put on something that’s not blue?’

“How the hell do you know that?” Harry snapped, slamming his bottle down onto the table and giving Dresden a withering look. “Hell, you haven’t been really been peeking into my shower, have you?”

Dresden blinked in surprise and observed Harry with an amazed expression on his face.

“Really?” He asked and paused, scratching his head. “You and blue underwear?”

“Yeah,” Harry answered slowly and scowled, irritation flaring up in his eyes. His next words were delivered with a mixture of wariness and hostility. “What about it?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” Dresden said quickly and paused, giving Harry a quick once-over glance. “It’s just that I thought it would be black silk boxers or something.”

“Whoa, did you just check me out?” Harry demanded and frowned. “And why would I wear silk?”

“Well, you are a Denarian,” Dresden started but Harry interrupted him by slamming his hand down on the table and shaking his head vigorously.

“Okay, this conversation has moved from amusing and quickly travelled down the path of ‘I’m being stalked by a wizard’. Maybe we could get back on topic. You left a message with my landlord, something about a job and, more importantly, some money.”

"Molly was telling me about you the other day," started Dresden, his face hardening and a serious glint appearing in his eyes. "She said you were good at killing things and had a knack for staying alive. What I need is..."

"Hang on," Harry interrupted and stared at Dresden with narrowed eyes. "Molly as in Molly the prostitute who works on the corner of my street or Molly as in Molly 'Stuck-up bitch' Carpenter?"

"Molly Carpenter," Dresden answered and a flicker of annoyance flashed on his face at the end of Harry's sentence.

"How the hell do you know her?" Harry demanded.

"She was my apprentice," Dresden answered and smiled in amusement at Harry's disbelieving stare. "Technically, I suppose she still is."

"It sucks to be you," Harry said earnestly, shaking his head in sympathy. "Just...ouch, man."

"She's not that bad," Dresden said lightly and gave Harry an annoyed glare when the Denarian gave a loud snort of disbelief. "Anyway, what I need to do is to kill some vampires. I could use some extra help."

"What type of vampires?" Harry asked, his sarcastic demeanour completely disappearing and being replaced with a serious expression. "And how many?"

"Red Court," Dresden answered curtly. "And around fifty of them."

"What's the cut?" Harry pressed on, his eyes narrowed.

"Twenty-grand," Dresden answered seriously.

Harry said nothing but his nostrils flared as he took in a deep breath. Twenty-grand...now, that would go a long way in making his life a lot easier. Dresden must have noticed his reaction but said nothing,

although his lips quirked into a smile and he took the opportunity to take a piece of Harry's steak.

"Hey!" Harry snapped in annoyance.

"Sorry," Dresden mumbled, his cheeks full. He swallowed the bite down and continued on with business. "Here's what's happening. A few dozen Red Court vampires are meeting in seven hours. Some of them are nobility to, a pair of Counts and a Duke- all very respected for their battle-strategy. I can't get any Wardens or White Council members to come in and from what Molly's told me, you'd be perfect."

"Whoa, the White Council?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Huh," Dresden uttered. "I thought you would have known about us. The White Council is the ruling body of all, what do you call us, True-Wizards in the world. Some of them most powerful wizards in the world serve of the White Council. It's ruled by the senior council, seven dully nominated representatives who..."

"I all about the White Council and your little soldier Wardens," Harry interrupting impatiently. He rolled his eyes and scowled. "I'm not an idiot, which, coincidentally, is why I wouldn't touch the White Council with a ten-foot dick. They execute people like me, Dresden, because I don't follow their pathetic little 'laws of magic'."

"A ten-foot..." Dresden started, looking bewildered. He stopped, took a deep breath and composed himself. "Look, the White Council can't make it on time. That's why they've given the money to hire somebody with your...specialised...talents. You won't be meeting any member of the White Council at all, well, apart from me."

"You're on the White Council?" Harry asked in surprise, leaning forward in his chair and staring at Dresden with confusion. "You, with your infamous reputation? Weren't you on probation a couple years back for killing your guardian with black magic?"

"Hey, self-defence," Dresden said defensively. "He tried to bewitch me, and when that didn't work, he tried to kill me."

“Didn’t you start the war between your White Council and the Red Court vampires?” Harry pressed on with a malicious glint in his eyes.

“Technically, yes,” Dresden admitted. “But there were innocent lives at stake and they had already broken the peace accords.”

“Whatever,” Harry muttered, waving the explanation away with a dismissive flick of his hand. “That’s not the point. The point is, I really don’t think I should be getting involved in the war. It could be bad for my health.”

“Fine then,” Dresden said and paused. “Fifty-thousand.”

Harry, who was in the process of rising up from the table, promptly sat back down again and stared at Dresden with interest. Dresden sat there, his shoulders squared, and waited for Harry to speak.

“You seem really keen on getting my help,” Harry noted shrewdly.

“I heard that you were a wand-wizard,” Dresden asked, and leant forward to stare at Harry intently. “Can you make a magical device known as a ‘portkey’ or can you do that spell that lets you travel from one place to another?”

“You mean apparate,” Harry said and nodded. “Yeah, sure, to both of them. Why do....wait, where are these Vampires meeting again?”

“That’s the thing,” Dresden said. “The meeting is in Indonesia. So, without your skills to get us there, there’s no point in organising a raid. This is why none of the other White Council members can get there; it’s a bit short notice.”

“Where’d you hear about this meeting then,” Harry asked curiously.

“Oh, a little faery told me,” Dresden said airily.

“So, I just make the transportation to get you there and you’d do all the rest?” Harry questioned in disbelief.

“No, no, no,” Dresden said quickly, shaking his head. “For that much money, you’d be expected to fight. It shouldn’t be much trouble for you. I heard you were pretty good, that you’d taken on a Drakon and won, that you killed old Nico of the Denarian’s, and that you’d taken down some warlocks and even some kind of Outsider.”

“I am pretty good,” Harry admitted with a smug smirk. Suddenly, he frowned and stared at Dresden curiously. “Where’d you hear all of that? Especially the last bit about the Outsider?”

“From me,” Somebody called out from the entrance of the room. Harry’s head shot around as another man walked down the stairs leading into the diner and he groaned.

“Fuck,” He cursed softly under his breath.

“It’s not polite to swear, Harry,” Michael chided. The man had dark against silver hair, a well-trimmed black beard with worry and laugh lines around mouth and eyes. He was a tall, well-built man with grey eyes. As a Knight of the Cross, Michael was an expert tactician and hand-to-hand fighter, and also possessed some spiritual power of his own.

He was also the last person that Harry ever wanted to meet. Despite Harry’s new status as a Knight, there was a deeply ingrained survival instinct embedded within him that made him want to fight-flight his way past the man whose order was originally designed to kill Denarian’s like him.

“I didn’t say anything!” Dresden said defensively and Michael paused, his grey eyes showing a fair amount of amusement and exasperation.

“I meant that Harry,” he said slowly, gesturing towards Harry. “It’s good to see you again, Har- Dresden.”

“Michael,” Dresden greeted warmly, standing up to shake the other man’s hand while Harry looked on with a disgusted scowl on his face. The two men sat down and Michael turned to Harry, assessing the younger boy with critical eyes.

"You're looking much better than the last time we met," Michael said conversationally.

"I wish I could say the same about you," Harry said in pseudo-warm tone. "But, unfortunately, your face still looks like some kind of slimy frog that a horse trod on too many times."

"So, I take it that you two have met," Dresden said slowly, eyeing Harry carefully.

"Have you ever wondered what happened to Fidelacchius after you gave it back to me?" Michael asked and gestured at Harry. "Meet the newest member of my Order."

"Hang on," Dresden said, his mouth dropping with shock. He stared between Michael and Harry as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Isn't he a Denarian?"

"Yes," Michael said simply with a small smile.

Harry sighed and palmed his forehead against his hands as Dresden paused, trying to struggle through the impossibilities of what he had just been told.

"Don't you guys have rules against that?" Dresden asked Harry. Harry blinked. "Won't your union be angry at you? You could get your pay docked from you. Hey, they may even take away your sick leave."

"Okay, if I'm going to do this then I have one rule," Harry said coldly, jabbing a finger in Dresden's direction. "I'm the smart-arse here, not you."

Michael snorted and seemed unaffected by Harry's anger when the young Denarian turned his gaze upon him.

"Alright, alright," Dresden said, raising his hands in a placating manner. Suddenly he looked very serious and Harry blinked as a change went through the man, making him seem much more dangerous than he had looked previously. "It will just be us three and

Molly going in. I've got the layout with me and I'll show you when we meet up again. We'll use the portkey, arrive there at dawn, blast the door down, kill the vampires, rescue any innocents we can find and get out of there before the reinforcements come."

"So, fifty-grand," Harry said musingly, taking in the plan.

"Yeah," Dresden said and paused, eying Harry carefully. "Can I count you in?"

"How much are you paying him?" Harry asked, jerking his thumb at Michael.

"Nothing," Dresden said, his eyes flickering over his friend, "He volunteered."

"We all have our orders," Michael said simply.

"I'll do it for seventy," Harry said firmly and stared at Dresden with a stony expression. "No less."

"No deal," rebuked Dresden almost immediately, looking almost amused. "The White Council only gave me forty-five, so five of this is coming out of my own pocket. I can't afford that much."

"Ah well," Harry said lightly with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, looking totally relaxed. "I guess you don't get to go to Indonesia."

"I guess you don't get fifty-thousand dollars," Dresden replied and Harry's expression hardened. The Denarian Knight chewed on his for a few moments as he considered the proposal.

"Ah, why not?" Harry muttered and slammed his hand down on the table. "Besides, I've already pissed the vampires off today. May as well do it right."

"I'll drink to that," Dresden said heartily.

“So will I,” Harry said and rose from the table. “But I’m going somewhere where I don’t have to see his,” here he gestured at Michael, “ugly mug, Feel free to eat my steak, Dresden.”

“We’ll go in six hours from now,” Dresden said and also stood. “Meet me here with the portkey, ready to go. After the mission is complete, I’ll give you the details of the bank account the White Council has already wired the money in.”

Harry nodded curtly and extended his hand. Dresden cocked his head but took Harry’s hand in a firm handshake. A moment later, Harry let go and without walked from the Diner without another word.

“Well, he’s interesting....” Dresden said slowly, eying Harry’s retreating back as he stomped up the stairs and disappeared through the door.

“You have no idea,” murmured Michael.

“What do you know about him?” Dresden asked curiously. He settled down and took Harry’s leftover steak and soft-drink as Michael opened his mouth and began to recite everything he knew about Harry, including what he had personally experienced and what his daughters had told him.

A/N: A big thanks to DLP for their help with this chapter, and the chapters previous. The first few, in my opinion, came out as a little clunky, but I feel that this one was much better. Of course, if you disagree, feel free to flame me....or not.

The sun was setting when Harry found himself in one of the side alleys near McAnnaly's. His emerald eyes scanned the surroundings carefully as he strode forward briskly, his dark leather coat flapping softly in the cool breeze. He held the cane in his left hand, the sheath for the Knight's sword Fidelacchius in his left hand and his wand clutched in his right hand. His gaze stopped on the small group waiting for him and he paused before them, wrinkling his nose from a particularly distinct smell coming from a nearby garbage bin.

Dresden and Michael were cloaked in the shadows as they conversed with soft tones over by a chain-linked fence. Harry's sharp eyes picked out Molly standing by her father's side, dressed in a simple brown robe and holding a long, wooden staff, a simple and effective focus for True Magic. Harry also noted a blasting rod, a tool that amplified offensive spells, clutched on her belt.

"Hello," said Molly, her face stony as she greeted Harry. Harry didn't reply but he scrunched up his face as he mouthed something underneath his breath. Molly frowned as she caught the movement and her eyes narrowed in anger.

"Children," Dresden warned, catching the interaction between his apprentice and his newly hired mercenary. "If you're all done than maybe we can get to business?"

"You sound like a mobster," Harry muttered but obliged and stared at Dresden with an impassive look on his face. The True-Wizard was wearing his black leather duster once again, a blasting rod attached to his waist.

'That's good, beloved,' Meciell said, a touch of amusement in her voice. 'Remember; be on your best behaviour. We do need that money and if we manage to impress Dresden then we might have a somewhat constant source of income.'

“Here’s a map of the place that we’re attacking,” Dresden said and handed Harry a small piece of paper. “I’ve marked the location of where the vampire leaders are meeting and of any guards that I know of, but count on three times the number I’ve put down. My spy is good, but he’s not that good.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and managed to feel a little impressed as he stared down at the detailed map. He scanned it quickly and prodded Meciél with his mind.

‘Alright, you slacker,’ He thought. ‘Time for you to do your part.’

‘Slacker?’ Meciél grumbled and Harry snorted in amusement. Despite her tone, Harry felt Meciél analyse the map carefully and commit it to her vast memory as she begun calculating possible scenarios and escape routes.

“Now, as to our strategy,” Dresden started, rubbing his hands together. Harry got the distinct sense that the older wizard had done this a few times before. Still, to his trained eye, he could see that Dresden was at least a little nervous.

‘Good,’ Meciél whispered softly. ‘Fear is a great motivator of not getting killed.’

‘Haven’t you heard?’ Harry thought with mock-arrogance. ‘I’m invincible, remember?’

‘Do listen up, beloved,’ Meciél said in exasperation. ‘It would be a pity if you were killed. I’ve only just started breaking you in.’

‘I’m not an untrained dog, Meciél,’ Harry thought back snippily.

‘No, I will admit that you are not,’ Meciél responded and a gentle tone of teasing entered her voice. ‘You do know some tricks.’

‘Ouch, I left myself open for that one,’ Harry thought and paused. ‘Hey, does this mean I can shit on the carpet and get away with it?’

“Potter!” Somebody barked and Harry sighed, rolling his eyes and breaking contact with Meciél. He glanced at Dresden, who was looking at him with a faint expression of irritation.

“Please, go on,” Harry said blandly.

“The vampires are trying to be clandestine,” Dresden continued slowly, keeping an eye on Harry. “So the guard will be light. I don’t expect a lot of wards either; too much magic would draw the attention of the White Council...er, if we didn’t already know about them. Once we enter the building, you and I will go upstairs and deal with the vampires while Molly and Michael will head downstairs, where they’re keeping most of the thralls.”

“We’ll do our bit,” Michael said and Harry rolled his eyes at the older man, noting that he was sporting a long cloak covering what seemed to be a suit of chain mail.

“Thralls?” Harry asked carefully, his eyes narrowing in speculation. “We’re looking after Thralls now?”

“Hey, Thralls are just normal human beings that have had their minds twisted by the Red Court to do their bidding,” Dresden said and turned a very serious look upon Harry, as if he almost expected the young Denarian to object. “So yes, we are saving them.”

“Okay, okay,” Harry said quickly, raising his hands in a gesture of mock-surrender. “You’re the big, bad boss. I get it.”

“If we haven’t killed most of them by five minutes then we’ll meet back in the entrance foyer with the thralls and take the front way out back to the portkey,” Dresden continued. “If we have, we continue on. It would be good if we can take one of the bloodsuckers alive, especially one of the higher-ranking members of the Red Court. I know it’s not like you Potter, but at least try.”

“You’re right,” Harry said flatly. “It’s not like me, but hey, you’re paying me so, whatever. I do have one concern though, just a little itsy-bitsy one, what’s to stop the Vampires from, well, you know, running away?”

"The backdoor will take them into Michael's path and I'm sure that he can deal with them," Dresden said wryly, giving his friend a respectful nod. "I also have a friend of mine from the Faerie Courts raising a...net, of sorts....to stop them from escaping. It only lasts ten minutes, hence the five minute limit mark. When it drops, you can guarantee that more vampires will be dropping out by the hundreds."

"A friend?" Harry asked sceptically.

"You're not the only one who knows a Faerie Queen," Dresden said and smiled at Harry's surprised look. "Lily is the new Summer Lady. I knew her when she was mortal and she owes me a few favours. Besides, she doesn't like vampires anymore than we do."

"Okay," Harry said slowly after a moments pause. "Hey, have you had sex with her yet?"

Dresden blinked as shock filtered on her face and Harry gave Dresden a smug smile.

"No boasting then," He murmured and grinned as Dresden shook his head in bemusement.

"I have brains. I wouldn't touch Lily, and especially Maeve, if my life depended on it," Dresden said disapprovingly. "They're Faerie Queens, Potter. Don't expect that you got your little tryst for nothing."

"What would you know?" Harry scoffed, waving Dresden's concerns away. The exact details between Maeve and himself was not a matter of concern for him.

"Have you got the portkey?" Dresden said with a sigh, changing the subject back to more important matters.

"I do," Harry said and reached into his coat to pull out a small, ratty piece of rope. "It's been created and specified to the exact coordinates you've given me."

"Is that it?" Molly said slowly as she stared at the piece of rope critically.

"Well, yeah," Harry said and frowned. "What's wrong, not pretty enough for you?"

"Well, it doesn't look very...glamorous," Dresden admitted and narrowed his eyes. Harry knew that he must have been reaching out his other senses because when he came out of it a few seconds later, he seemed content.

"A portkey can be enchanted into pretty much anything," Harry explained in irritation.

"Are you sure?" Molly asked doubtfully.

"Just take hold of the damn rope," Harry snapped impatiently.

Dresden, Michael and Molly all stepped forward and laid a hand on the rope. Harry took a deep breath and uttered the activation password as he prepared himself for the turbulent journey that was about to follow.

"God is dumb."

Suddenly his vision was full of blurring, spiralling sparkles and light of all different colours. Something tugged- no, yanked- at his navel and Harry was thrown straight into a dizzying vortex of scratchy, high-pitched noise as the small group disappeared from American soil and transported themselves half-way across the world.

With a sickening spiral of light and sound, the small group reappeared and thumped to the ground. Harry was the first to recover and jumped to his feet, his eyes scanning his surroundings. They were definitely not in America anymore as the sun was slowly rising in the west. In front of him was a quiet, deserted street with a row of unfamiliar buildings. There were a few cars parked on the side of the road but they all looked rusted and unusable. Behind them, there was a large stretch of sparkling ocean and in the distance there was the faint outline of an island.

"Damn," Dresden cursed softly, shaking his head as if he were throwing off his dizziness. He staggered up onto his feet and wobbled there for a second. "That's going to take some getting used to."

Molly groaned as she climbed to her feet and gave Harry a fierce glare, her eyes bright with anger.

"Could you have made it any rougher?" She demanded.

"Quite easily, yes," Harry said and levelled a cool smile. "For example, if I had been wrong in the calibrations then we could have landed in any number of places throughout the world in any number of tiny little pieces. So, stop your bitching."

"Is that it?" Michael asked, staring past Harry at one of the houses in front of them. Harry turned his head as Dresden frowned.

"I think so," He said and cocked his head. Harry also turned and observed the house in front of him.

On the outside, it looked like any of the other rundown two-story house on the street. However, something lay beyond the outside appearance, something tantalising, and Harry took a deep breath and opened up his Sight, his ability to see beyond the physical surface, to see into the deeper surfaces of objects and places, to see emotion and magic of what was, what had been and what will be. Most wand-wizards were unable to use the ability of Third Sight, Harry only being able to use it because of Meciél, and the few that did quickly went insane, for whatever somebody viewed under Third Sight stayed in their memories for the rest of their lives. Under sight, Harry had no doubts that this was the vampire's hideout.

The house itself was a place of suffering. Dark emotions- hunger, pain, hatred and greed- hung over it as if they were visible things, weeds of darkness that clung to the bricks. Unseen spirits, feeders on pain, despair and darkness, hovered over the place, mindless shades that were always to be found in such places, like flies over a garbage heap. For a split second, Harry saw a grinning, empty skull that

pushed the aura of death aside and knew that the house would be seeing death sometime in the near future.

It seemed like an eternity that Harry stood there but in reality it was less than a few seconds. At the end, Harry closed his eyes and paused, allowing Meciél to reach out and soak in what dark power she could to amplify his own. When she was done, Harry blocked his sight and opened his eyes. He gripped the cane in his left hand and the wand in his right and waited impatiently as Michael put a comforting hand on his daughter's shoulder and looked over at Dresden in concern.

"Are you alright, Harry?" the Knight asked, addressing Dresden with a soft, concerned voice.

"No," Harry said and Michael blinked, turning his head to look at Harry. "You see, I'm ready to go and kill stuff because, quite frankly, it's one of my hobbies, but I have a bunch of crybabies who decided that they needed to change their nappies before anything big has really happened."

"Alright, we get it," Dresden said in a weary, slightly irritated voice, his eyes glued to the vampire hideout. Harry watched as the man gave a short, sharp shake of his head and realised that Dresden had also used his Sight.

"It takes a sick mind to just throw off what we've just seen," Molly said biting, her gaze flickering over Harry in something he had never seen before- contempt. "And a sicker mind to actually use that power."

"Ah, go fuck yourself," Harry said casually.

He gripped his wand and sought out Meciél's blazing presence, allowing potent Hellfire to roar through his body in a cascading inferno of heat and power. Sulphur filled his nostrils as the runes on his wand glowed with an eerie crimson light.

"So, are we trying to be subtle here?" Harry questioned with an anticipatory smile, eying the hideout with barely concealed

excitement. Hellfire, combined with the promise of an upcoming fight, reached into a primitive place of any human that revelled in slaughter and death.

"No," Dresden said and straightened his blasting rod in hand, his face grim and determined.

Michael reached over his shoulder and with the hissing scrap of metal-on-metal, pulled out a gleaming broadsword. Harry almost flinched as the blade flared with soft, silver light and blinked when a soft, humming noise buzzed from the sword.

"Mine's never done that," He muttered, gripping his cane a little tighter and instinctively edging away from Michael.

Suddenly Dresden frowned, his face becoming distant. After a few moments, he nodded. "Alright. Lily has pulled a net over the place, so nobody can escape into the Nevernever for the next ten minutes. Potter, feel free to help me blow down the door."

"With pleasure," Harry said and focussed his dark powers, his eyes glinting with a hellish tint. He levelled his wand as Dresden unclipped his blasting rod and pointed it towards the building.

"Flam-mamurus!" Dresden cried out and his blasting rod swung forward, pitching a small ball of fire onto the street. It struck the asphalt with a loud crack.

There was a crackling howl as soon as the ball of fire hit the ground and fire ripped its way up and out of the asphalt on the road. It rippled forward towards the house in a jagged row of cracks and suddenly a fountain of glowing molten stone shot up in a powerful and controlled geyser of fire. Dresden's face was tightened in concentration as a three-metre-high wave of red-hot magma splashed forward and struck at the house.

There was a flash of shimmering blue light and the wave of lava splashed against the wards, a barely discernible ring of magic surrounding the house. The wards flickered and glowed with a the pale blue light, deflecting and absorbing the offending heat, and

offending magma splashed down onto the road and cars. Steam and smoke rose into the air and the ring of magic grew more and more visible until it seemed as if there was a dome of light surrounding the first half of the house.

Dresden gave Harry a quick nod and Harry smiled coldly, levelling his wand at the front door.

“Cornollivo!” Harry roared, pouring a significant portion of Hellfire into his spell.

His arm buckled and he had to take a step backwards as an enormous blast of power exploded from the tip of his wand. An eerie screeching noise filled the air as Harry’s curse drove through the wards like a drill and slammed against the door. The spell exploded in a roaring blast of flames and although much of it was absorbed or deflected by the wards, the rest rocketed into the door, blasting it off its hinges in a fiery carpet of heat.

“Now!” Dresden yelled over the noise of roaring flames and sizzling heat. “While the wards are weakened!”

“Let’s go and kill things,” Harry said grimly and strolled forward, past the flickering flames and disappearing into the rolling clouds of black smoke as he entered the darkened house.

The first thing Harry noticed when he stepped inside the house was the smell. It was a strange and pungent mixture of rotting flesh and exotic incenses. The second thing he noticed was the five men standing in front of him with automatic weapons. They stared at him with blank eyes, their minds controlled and suppressed by the vampires and as one, they opened fire.

‘Contego puniceus!’ Harry thought quickly as the booming drone of gunfire began. A burning dome of fiery crimson and ebony magic sprang around him, bullets smashing into and clanging against it. He was an instant too slow and suddenly his stomach was on fire as a dozen bullets struck him.

The first eight or so smashed against the various protection spells Harry had woven into his coat over the years, bouncing away with in a shower of sparks. The other four were partially slowed down but slammed into him and tore through the left of his stomach. Harry's eyes bulged but Meciél had already taken over and directed his body to the right and behind one of the couches.

"Son's of..." Harry snarled, his eyes glittering with fury as Meciél dulled the pain of the bullets. As the men turned their guns onto the couch, shredding the cloth and wooden frame to bits, Harry jumped out and spun around, his wand flicking through the air.

"Avada Kedavra!" He spat out. The rat-tat-tat of gunfire was temporarily drowned out by a roaring sound reminiscent to wind and a blast of eerie green magic streaked forward and struck the first man, who buckled under the force of the spell and was propelled backwards. The light bulb flickered and exploded as Harry glided forward, a glimmering dome of fiery magic protecting him.

Bullets rained down on his shield but it held as Harry glided forward, his wand flicking upwards in a rather brutal fashion. One of them men made a soft, gurgling noise and collapsed to the ground with wide eyes as litres of blood poured from his eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Another man, trying to reload his weapon, fell to another burst of green light and the fourth and final guard screamed in agony as a shimmering arc of silver tore through his torso. He collapsed to the ground as Harry spun around, searching for any more enemies, his mind wrapped in Hellfire.

He could hear dozens of footsteps from upstairs as the first cries of panic began to echo around the house. His eyes flashed at the dead bodies, a cold and utterly remorseless expression on his face. He didn't need to turn around to know that Dresden, Michael and Molly had just entered the house behind him.

"Didn't I say that we weren't killing the Thralls?" Dresden asked furiously, his eyes picking out the dead bodies littering the ground. "We can save them!"

“Well, excuse me, but they fucking shot me,” Harry snarled and Dresden’s angry expression changed to concern as he stared at Harry, noting the bloodied wounds in the stomach.

“I thought you guys could shrug bullets off,” He said, gesturing for Michael and Molly to go forward. Harry barely paid them a glance as the Knight, his sword flaring with silver light, and his daughter sprinted from the room and thumped down the staircase.

“We can,” Harry admitted with gritted teeth as he inspected the wounds, his mind flashing back to the time when he had shot Deirdre three times in the chest to no avail. “But some of us can do it better than others.”

“Will you be alright?” Dresden asked, even as he strode across the room and peered up the staircase. “You can go back if you have to.”

Harry snorted, gripping the cane and wand tightly as he strode forward with nothing more than a very slightly stagger. At the same time, Meciél was simultaneously numbing the pain and beginning the process of knitting his flesh back together, clamping down on arteries to stop the bleeding temporarily stopping his digestive processes and boosting the potency of his stomach acid to start dissolving the bullet fragments. Bullet wounds were quite easy for Meciél to heal because there was no intruding magic embedded within the wounds. Other wounds, such as the scar on his face, were a lot harder for Meciél to deal with, especially when they were caused by powerful dark magic.

That said: a bullet to his head would kill Harry as surely as a Killing Curse. There were some injuries that couldn’t be healed, especially if they hit Meciél’s living quarters.

Dresden’s eyebrows rose as Harry strode over to the staircase and gave him a cold smile.

“I’m one of the better ones,” He said sourly. “Still, shrugging them off or not, bullets still fucking hurt. Now, don’t we have some vampires to kill?”

Harry and Dresden climbed the rickety stairs and passed before a sturdy-looking door. They paused and Harry raised his wand,

caressing the lock with the tip as he concentrated. There was a soft, blue flash and the door lock made an extremely quiet clicking noise. Harry nodded at Dresden and the older man stood back, raised his blasting rod and sent forward a blast of pure kinetic force.

The door exploded in a shower of wooden shards and Harry heard several cries of pain as the occupants of the room beyond were sprayed with flying splinters. His mind completely wrapped around Hellfire, Harry lurched forward and slammed his shoulder into the remains of the door, bursting forward into the room.

It was a long room, far longer than Harry would have expected. A large, rectangular swept from one side of the room to the other, dozens of chairs settled around it. Hundreds of candles extended out in candleholders from the grimy walls, casting an ominous glow as the room's occupants stared at the intruding wizards, who stared right back.

Some of them were still sitting in their seats but most had jumped out. They were all human, all appearing as if they were in their younger or middle-aged years. Men and women, all beautiful and clad in revealing clothing, stared at Harry and Dresden with bright, sensual eye-eyes that were currently filled with fear. Then, the eyes changed washed over until they were a complete, soulless black and they changed.

Their flesh sloughed and peeled away like a snake's scales, revealing the leathery, slimy flesh of the true vampire beast within them. Beautiful faces morphed into a cruel batlike face, horrid and ugly, their heads far too big for its body. Gaping, hungry jaws snapped at them, rows of razor-sharp fangs glinting as drool slid down their lips. Their slim body transformed into something with hunched, powerful shoulders and long, spindly legs. Slimy wings stretched out between the joints of their almost skeletal arms, arms that ended in claw-tipped fingers. Creatures that had a moment ago been the peak of sexual attraction hissed like cornered cats and lunged themselves at the two wizards.

Harry ducked to the left while Dresden ducked to the right as vampires threw themselves forward with powerful beats of their grotesque wings, their black eyes filled with an animalistic hunger and rage.

“Evertoxuro!” Harry barked and his wand flashed a continuous cloud of billowing fire blasted forward. Vampires hissed and screeched in pain, halting their advance and taking stumbling steps backwards. One of the chairs caught fire and collapsed, sending a vampire scuttling backwards with panicked movements.

On the other side of the room, Dresden levelled his blasting rod with a grim, determined expression and bellowed “Fuego!”

A column of fire as thick as a telephone pole flew from the tip of the rod, striking the carpeted ground and whipping across the floor towards three vampires. They screeched in pain, a noise similar to nails scratching down a blackboard, and were enveloped in a rushing blaze of flames.

Dresden strode forward, his blasting rod lying through the air and a muttered “Ventas servitas!” falling off his lips. Four of the heavy chairs sprang from the ground in a fierce gale of wind and slammed into the first row of charging vampires on the right side of the room, sending them tumbling backwards into their kin.

On the left side of the room, Harry was charging forward with a furious expression on his face. Behind his glinting eyes, Meciél analysed everything from Harry’s senses and a few things from her own, sending his wordless instructions and at times edging his body in a certain direction, leaving Harry to solely concentrate on destroying the enemy.

“Exturbo Arduro!” Harry growled and Hellfire amplified the already powerful fire-based spell.

A blasting flash of intensely bright flame slammed into one of the vampires and literally vaporised a good chunk of its head and chest. It collapsed to the ground and Harry gave its corpse a hefty kick, sending it into the path of a rushing vampire. The vampire jumped

over its kin and lunged at Harry with glinting fangs and sharp claws but Harry spun around and with a powerful thrust of his wand, shouted 'Effodio!' and grinned when the vampire's head exploded in a shower of dark gore.

"Riflettum" Dresden's voice roared from the other side of the room as he lifted his hands. Harry briefly saw some kind of bracelet glint with magic before a half-dome glittering silver and blue light formed around the older wizard.

Almost simultaneously, two of the vampires, still clad in human form, opened fire with a pair of sleek, automatic weapons. Sparks flashed over the shield and suddenly bullets were ricocheting all over the room. Two vampires growled as bullets pierced into their flesh and collapsed, while Harry, nudged by Meciél, threw himself to the ground and narrowly avoided a bullet to the head. The vampires were grinning when their guns gave a loud click and exploded as Dresden's True Magic interfered with their moving parts, causing the bullets to misfire. The vampires howled, their hands turned to bloody shreds and Dresden dropped his shield and sent a powerful lance of fire at a vampire who had just jumped over the table for him.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry snapped as he jumped up from the ground. A flash of eerie green light sprang forward and the noise of unmoving invisible wind drowned out the death scream of the vampire that was struck.

'To your right!' Meciél barked in his head and suddenly Harry's body automatically sidestepped, narrowly avoiding a large knife that would have skewered him. His cane whipped up and slammed down on the vampire's head, sending it crumpling to the ground. Meciél detected movement behind him and Harry, with a snarl of rage, whipped the sword out of the wooden cane and cleaved the approaching vampire into two in a flash of silver flames. Harry paused only long enough to slam the blade of water-patterned steel into the first vampire before he was up and away in a blur of silver light.

From the other side of the room, Dresden slammed his blasting rod down on a vampire's head and then brandished his hand. A ring on his finger flickered and suddenly a wave of unseen kinetic energy

blasted forward. Vampires near Dresden were torn from their feet and thrown across the room. Dresden took this opportunity to move forward, a tight grin of satisfaction curving his face.

Harry raised his wand with narrowed eyes and brandished it with a long sweep of his arm, the words 'Laedo fervefacio!' spilling from his lips. His wand whipped up into a whip-like movement and he brought it down on the dogs.

From the tip of his wand came a blazing whip of dark flames, which lashed out and gouged itself in a vampire's chest. The vampire collapsed in a heap of sizzling flesh as Harry drew the fire back and wrapped it around a second. His senses on high alert, Harry only needed a splits-second warning before he heaved the glowing silver sword over his head and brought it down on a third vampire's head, the sneaky beast collapsing to the ground. He tugged it out of the vampire's head and, his strength enhanced by Hellfire and dark power, hurled it at a vampire that had just jumped for him. The spinning sword became a blur of silver light and slashed through the vampire, embedding itself in the wall on the other side of the room.

At the same time, Dresden slammed his slender, wooden staff down on the ground, an incantation roaring from his lips as he sent a rolling wave of silent fire forward, no more than ten centimetres high. The fire splashed at the vampire's feet, two fell and were consumed in an eerie silence while the other three jump up onto the table. But Dresden was ready for them

"Satharak, na-kadum!" He shouted in a harsh tongue. A scarlet power flashed over him, following the gesture of his right hand and lashing out in a blaze of scarlet light that spun around the maddened vampires. It wound around them in movements too fast to see and they disappeared underneath a cocoon of fire.

Suddenly, it was all over. Harry and Dresden paused, both wizards taking a deep breath. Harry's eyes were alight with battle lust and pleasure and he stared at the vampiric remains with a wide grin on his face. Dresden, on the other hand, looked both tired and determined, his eyes raking over the dead vampires with the detachment of a soldier.

“Well, that was easy,” Harry declared after a moment or so. Hellfire ran through his body, more addictive than any drug, and a wide smile was spread across his face. “And fun, too. You know, I could I get used to the whole mercenary routine.”

“We’re not done yet,” Dresden said curtly and gestured to the unopened door in front of them.

Harry shrugged his shoulders, levelled his wand and blew it off his hinges with an easy flick of his wand. His smile suddenly disappeared and his eyes widened as two streaks of black shot forward. He got a glimpse of two handsome men with rich black hair and arrogant blue eyes before they attacked.

One of the vampires gestured at two of the chairs and with a flash of dim, dark light, the two chairs were blasted at Harry. Harry whipped his wand out, his eyes gleaming, and the chairs exploded in a roaring blast of crackling sapphire force. The other vampire launched a fistful of shadows at Dresden, who parried it with the staff in his left hand and sent it careening to the side. It enveloped a chair and when the fog that surrounded it disappeared, all that remained was a small pile of sawdust.

Dresden responded with a gout of flame from the blasting rod in his right hand and the vampire blurred as he threw himself to the side as the flame swept like a scythe across the ground. The vampire snarled, his human mask distorting and warping, and hurled another concave of shadows at Dresden, who parried it back. The vampire hissed and thrust out his palm, the shadow bouncing off with a small shower of sparks and into the roof. The house rocked and Dresden grunted as an explosion tore through the room. The vampire’s head shot upwards as a ton of rotten wood, broken tiles and burning insulating materials fell down upon it. The ground shuddered again as the vampire disappeared underneath the rubble.

As Dresden was dealing with his vampire, Harry was doing his best to avoid a flurry of flying furniture and debris as the other vampire continually launched them at Harry. Harry growled and flicked his wand, sending one of the chairs flying at him careening into the wall.

With a flick of his wand, a flash of purple magic blasted forward, ripping through the floor and two chairs as it lanced at the vampire. The vampire rolled forward and closed the distance between them at incredible speed, jumping up just in front of Harry with rage in its soulless black eyes.

“Eff...” Harry started but was interrupted as the vampire slammed his first down on Harry’s arm. Harry grunted as a brief flare of pain flashed through his body and his muscles clenched reflexively, his wand clattering to the ground.

Suddenly, the vampire was all over him, moving faster than Harry was capable, even with Meciél boosting his reflexes. Harry’s eyes watered as the vampires first slammed into his face and he staggered back, a fist flying up to his now bloodied nose. If anything, the scent of Harry’s blood seen to drive the vampire into a frenzy and Harry took another few steps back, his eyes flinching every time the vampire slammed a fist into somewhere sensitive. Spittle flew in his face, the narcotic effects of the vampire saliva trying to overwhelm his mind, but Meciél drove it off and worked with Harry to develop a counterattack.

Harry’s arms parried the next vampire’s strike and he lashed out with his first, his eyes glinting with anger. The vampire’s head snapped back and lashed out with one of his feet. Harry grunted as the foot slammed into his leg and pain flared in his mind. Suddenly, without any warning, Harry lunged forward and allowed Hellfire to partially consume his body. Large, bony wings sprang forward and impaled the vampire, ripping through his apparently human body with ease. The vampire gasped, his human mask rippling and distorting as Harry lifted him up with the wings and reached out with his hand.

His fallen wand soared through the air and Harry clasped it, channelling Hellfire into it and levelling it at the vampire’s now bat-like head. He ignored the spittle and screeches and said in a cold voice, ‘Effodio!’

The vampires head exploded in a shower of black blood, splattering the ashen wings, the carpeted floor and Harry himself. Harry threw the body to the ground and retracted his wings, a look of satisfaction

on his. At the exact same moment, Dresden had collapsed the roof on the other vampires head and a cloud of dust rolled through the room. When it receded, Harry couldn't hear any sounds of battle and fighting and allowed a victorious smile to cross his face. They had one.

"Are you alright, Potter?" asked Dresden, his voice tight as he waved the dust out of his face.

"I'm good," Harry said but winced when he took a step. The vampire had pummelled him all over and Harry knew that he would be feeling this tomorrow. "You know, they're so much easier when they don't use magic."

Dresden grunted in agreement and paused, surveying the ruined room for survivors while Harry summoned the cane and walked across the room to yank the sword out of the wall.

"So much for survivors," Dresden muttered. "Okay, that's it. Our time is up."

They both fell back to the living room, where Michael and Molly, the former sporting a blood-streak blade and the latter sporting a blood nose and singed robes, were leading a line of confused, dazed people out of the house.

"Is that all?" Dresden asked, scanning the line of thralls carefully.

Michael nodded grimly.

"The rest were used as food," He said, an echo of sadness in his voice. "They are in a better place now. Did you get the Count?"

"He's a little unoccupied. It was like somebody dropped a ton of bricks on him or something," Dresden said wryly. "At least this will delay their attack."

Michael nodded gravely as the shrill of sirens emerged in the distance. Apparently the gunfire and explosions hadn't gone

unnoticed. Dresden winced and exhaled loudly, running a hand over his face.

“Just what we need,” He muttered softly, before raising his voice. “Okay, we’ll leave the thralls here and let the local authorities take care of them for now. I’ll alert the White Council and let them pick them up. Besides, they’re not going to remember much anyway.”

“So, now what?” Harry asked, sheathing his sword back into the wooden cane.

“We burn the place down,” Dresden said firmly.

Harry grinned. “I can do that.”

Harry stared from across the street as the house went up in a blaze of fire. Flame jutted from the open door and black, oily smoke pumped into the air. The sirens were getting louder- they were almost there- so Harry turned around and reached into his coat. He pulled out the portkey rope and without another word, the group placed a hand on it and Harry said the password.

“Michael likes the penis.”

In a dizzying blur of colour and light, the group were hurled from Indonesia and back to America. They reappeared in the small, grimy alleyway outside McAnnaly’s and were thrown to their feet. Harry gave a loud grunt as he landed on the bullet wounds and shook his head, a soft growl escaping his lips.

“Fucking hell,” He cursed loudly, wincing as he staggered up. “I hate portkeys.”

“Language, Harry,” Michael chided and Harry made a face, absently brushing down his coat. He grimaced as his gloved hands came up sticky with dark blood and grime.

“Okay, my part’s over,” He said before Dresden could say. He fixed the other wizard with a stony look. “Dresden, I believe you have something of mine?”

Dresden nodded and didn't look too surprised as he jumped to his feet. He walked over to one of the nearby garbage cans and pulled out an envelope from inside. Harry wrinkled his nose as he took it and glanced inside, seeing a bankcard and a bank statement inside.

"Your PIN number and all the details are in there," Dresden said and extended a hand. "It was a pleasure doing business with you."

Harry stared at the hand and allowed a smirk to cross his face.

"You know what," He drawled slowly and clasped the hand tightly. "I have to agree."

Dresden looked surprised as Harry let go and twirled on his feet, disappearing from the alley and leaving the war-weary group behind.

He appeared in the middle of his living room and almost instantly his face scrunched up in pain. He looked down at his chest and touched his bloodied nose gingerly, wincing as another flare of pain rocketed through him.

"Can't you do something about that?" He muttered sourly.

'My apologies, beloved,' Meciél said and suddenly a blazing warmth shot over him, Meciél's power soothing away much-but not all- of his pain. 'I dare not numb the pain any longer lest I damage your nervous system. The brain wasn't designed to suppress pain.'

"So, what about the bullets?" Harry asked as he limped to the bathroom. His leg was aching from the vampire's kick and he wouldn't have been surprised if something was broken. Sure, Meciél could heal his wounds- but, damn, they still hurt like a bitch.

'We can take them out now or I can dissolve them,' Meciél informed him as he entered the bathroom.

"How long will that latter take?" Harry asked as he took off his gloves, throwing them onto the grimy sink. He placed down his wand and

wooden cane and winced as his ribs protested over Meciél's blazing warmth.

'A few days,' Meciél admitted.

"Ah, I can't wait that long," Harry said, wincing as he took off his coat. "I need a shower, a massage and some good-old-fashioned faery sporting."

'You certainly look the part,' Meciél said critically and Harry blinked, taking a good look at his beat-up body in the mirror. His nose was crusted with dry blood and three small holes protruded from into his shirt. Some wicked bruises littered his chest and leg, although some of them were already fading away as Meciél started the process of healing them.

"I have you know that I am the pinnacle of human perfection," Harry said tiredly, glancing away and suppressing a wince.

Meciél scoffed but Harry felt her amusement as he took off his shirt and turned on the water for his shower. He only had cold water but that would do for now. Besides, Meciél could easily make him believe that the water was hot.

"So, that was fun," Harry said after a moment's pause, stripping off his pants and throwing them into the corner.

'Perhaps, but you almost got killed,' Meciél said, a touch worrying. 'I suggest that we rest for a few more weeks before we do anything, after all, we have money now.'

"So we do," Harry said and a grin crossed his face. It faded and he sighed as he gestured down to his stomach, stepping under the water and allowing the spray to wash away the blood. "Okay, let's get these bullets out of me."

'This will hurt, beloved,' Meciél warned.

"Define 'hurt'," Harry asked carefully. "Because I have been through some pretty painful shit, Meciél."

'Have you ever given birth before?'

"Fuck."

A/N: Remember that this is rated 'M' for a reason, mainly for Harry's vivid descriptions of Dumbledore having sex with a phoenix. Also remember that Harry doesn't like God and regularly bags the church and so forth. Now you have been warned, I expect no bitching over some of the comments.

Cheers to the DLP crew, as usual. I should probably get a proper and official paragraph of commendation or something.
Some months later

Late October: Harry's Apartment

"Come on," Harry protested, breathing heavily and wiping sweat away from his brow. He looked dishevelled and tired but kept his wand up as he circled the Meciél's illusionary figure. "A ten minute break, that's all I'm asking."

"Your enemies will not give you a chance to rest," Meciél said warningly. She was clad in robes of the purest white and, unlike Harry, looked as beautiful and unruffled as ever.

She raised her wand again and Harry threw himself to the side as a stream of azure vapour shot for him. The illusionary attack was so real that felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and an icy wind bit at his face.

Both he and Meciél were currently standing in his bare living room, surrounded by the magical circle that prevented Harry's spells from blowing something up that he probably needed. Dozens of candles flickered with a soft, dim glow from the walls, everlasting fire- or the closest that Harry could achieve- providing the only light. The pair of thick, velvety-red curtains permanently covered the windows and the stout wooden door at the only entrance prevented anybody from looking in and peeking at what he was doing.

"I know that," Harry grumbled, back on his feet in an instant and circling Meciél warily. "But I don't think I'll be fighting my enemies for over two hours. I'll have either killed them, them me or be long gone."

"I am not dead, nor are you long gone," Meciél said, circling Harry slowly with an almost-predatory look in her eyes. "Yet still we fight."

"Well, yeah," Harry snapped in irritation. His wand flicked through the air, dark fire pooling at the tip of his wand, but, moving as a blur, Meciél swished her wand and Harry's arm was painfully yanked to the left. Fire jutted out of his wand, striking at the large protective dome that covered the living room and disappearing in a soft haze of greenish-blue glow.

"But most of my enemies don't live in my head," He continued, returning the favour and parrying Meciél as she tried to send a piercing streak of silver magic at him. Meciél manipulated the illusion so that his spell caused her to stumble to the side, but she quickly regained her composure. "In fact, none of my enemies live in my head."

"I am trying to hurt you and I live in your head," Meciél said and a wicked smile crossed her face, her silver eyes dancing with amusement. "Does that not make me your enemy?"

"That makes you a scorned lover," Harry scoffed and flipped his wand into his left hand, dangling his right at Meciél's face. "Meciél, meet my right hand, a great source of relief during these troubled years of puberty. Now, I hope you two can play nice and be friends..."

A sudden blast of pain slammed into Harry and he toppled over with a grunt, clutching his stomach and desperately trying to breathe as his lungs constricted within his chest. His eyes bulged as he tried to raise his wand, but an invisible force pinned his entire body down to the floor. Meciél appeared in his vision, looming above him and looking utterly merciless as she stared down at him.

"Alright," Harry gasped out, a pained expression on his face. "That comment might have been a little..."

"Yes, beloved?" Meciél asked pleasantly. "Also, just as a reminder, I suggest that you stop worrying about what quips to say and focus on what shields to produce. It might be a little less...painful."

Harry just glared at her with defiant green eyes and she let out a little sigh. Suddenly Harry could breathe and move again. He let in an explosive inhale and gasped for a few seconds, allowing the blessed oxygen cool down his burning lungs.

"This would be a lot easier if you let me use, well, you," Harry muttered tiredly as he stood up. He winced as he gingerly rubbed his chest and walked towards and through the giant flickering dome of protective magic. The integrity of the circle lost, the magical dome collapsed in a soft shower of sparks as Harry collapsed into the nearest chair, leaning back with a relieved sigh.

"Use me?" Meciél repeated and sighed, shaking her head. Her flowing black hair glittered as she glided forward with an exasperated expression on his face. "Must you refer to everything I say back to sex?"

"Hey, innocent of those charges this time, thank you very much," Harry said quickly. Meciél raised an eyebrow at Harry's earnest expression, looking sceptical. "I meant that when I'm in a fight, I can use Hellfire and your reflexes and stuff to help me. This was just plain, old me."

"There may be a time, beloved, when I am no longer able to assist you. If so, I would want you to be able to function far greater than your enemies," Meciél said. Harry frowned as a flicker of sadness crossed her face, her silvery eyes distant in her memories.

She absently ran a hand over Harry's hair and made the motion of smoothing it back. Harry felt tingles of pleasure from her touch and gave her a tired smile, affection lighting his eyes as he gave her a mental prod, shaking her out of her stupor.

"Are you..." he started.

He was interrupted as there was a loud knock on his door. He frowned, rolling his eyes and heaving an exasperated sigh.

"What does the moron want now?" He muttered under his breath as he climbed to his feet and walked towards the door. "I've already paid

him for the month. If I have to bribe him again, I am going to shove a rake up his....fucking hell!"

Harry stared through the peephole with wide eyes as he took in the person on the other side. Clad in purple and silver robes and wearing both a wizard's hat and a benign smile stood Albus Dumbledore. His blue eyes twinkled as they stared directly at Harry's and one hand rose to stroke his long, white beard.

"Hello Harry," He said cheerfully. "Why don't you open the door so we can have small talk?"

"Ah, why don't I shoot myself in the foot instead?" Harry retorted slowly, his mind whirling in thought as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing.

"Because, my dear boy, that would cause you great pain and me great distress," Dumbledore chuckled softly. "And neither of us wants that."

"My dear boy?" Harry repeated slowly and paused. "Fucking hell, you're here to rape me, aren't you? Don't lie to me, Dumbledore! I've heard all the rumours about you! Go stuff your dick in that oversized thanksgiving dinner of yours and bugger off!"

"That last statement could be taken in so many different ways," Meciél mused thoughtfully from behind him and Harry blinked, yanking his eye away from the peephole and turning to stare at her.

"Hey," He muttered sourly. "The sex jokes are my thing, alright? Now what the hell are we going to do?"

"Calm down, beloved," Meciél said soothingly and Harry felt her presence try to wash away his unease and panic. He shrugged it off and stared at her incredulously.

"Calm down?" He repeated and scoffed. "It's a bit hard to calm down when Albus Fucking Dumbledore is standing at my front door."

"I do not believe his intentions are hostile, beloved," Meciél said quietly. "For one, our wards would not have held him at bay had he chosen to attack us. No, he has come here for a different reason."

"Like what?" Harry demanded.

"Why don't you ask?" Meciél retorted at Harry's challenging tone and Harry blinked.

He made a face and turned back to the door, staring at Dumbledore threw the peephole. The Headmaster looked completely relaxed as he waited for Harry patiently. He was absently humming a soft tune as he curiously examined the grimy hallway around him with twinkling eyes.

"Why are you here?" Harry called out loudly and Dumbledore blinked, staring back at the door with a pleasant smile on his face. "Don't you have a school to run and little boys to molest?"

"I have left Hogwarts into the capable hands of Professor McGonagall for a few hours," Dumbledore said and smiled faintly. "I am confident that I will get the castle back in one piece when I return, even in these troubled times."

"So, what do you want?" Harry asked warily, gripping his wand tightly and preparing himself to activate the wards.

Over the years, he had erected a great deal of wards around his little apartment. Many of them were to keep others from detecting just what went down in between these four walls, but others were deigned for protection and defence. Unlike the Hogwarts wards, these wards were designed to fry anybody who tried to break in and provided several other nasty surprises. All Harry had to do was activate them.

Of course, against a wizard of Dumbledore's calibre, the wards would probably last two minutes- if he was lucky.

"I merely want to talk, Harry," Dumbledore said and paused. "I know that you have recently begun hiring your formidable skills out to certain parties. I may have a business proposition for you."

"Whatever it is, I'm not interested," Harry said flatly. "Now go away."

"Not interested," Dumbledore mused softly and reached into his sparkling purple robes. He pulled out a large, open sack of golden galleons and placed it in clear view of the key hole. "One thousand golden galleons, Harry."

"What do I have to do?" Harry said slowly, eying the coins with something like greed on his face. "Because if you know that I've been hiring myself out then you know I've gotten paid recently. I'm set for about a year or so, Dumbledore, more even."

"All that is required is that you open your door and give me five minutes of your time," Dumbledore said. His light blue eyes rose and stared directly at the peephole, directly at Harry. "We have matters to discuss, Harry, matters that concern us all."

"Let you in?" Harry said and gave a loud, barking snort. "Oh, I don't think so."

"I thrice promise you that I shall do you know harm for the duration of this visit," Dumbledore recited slowly and Harry paused, uncertainty wrestling its way onto his face.

"Can I trust that?" He asked Meciél, his eyes never leaving Dumbledore's form.

"Given his close nature with a Summer Faery, then yes," Meciél's illusion answered softly. Harry didn't need to turn around to see it disappear from his senses and Meciél's presence washed over his mind, easing his concerns and strengthening him beyond his normal magical limits. 'But be wary, beloved. Be very wary.'

"Alright," Harry said slowly and took a deep breath, steeling himself. He unlocked the door, automatically lifting a dozen different wards, and opened it to stare at Dumbledore with a cold gaze. "You have five minutes, Dumbledore."

With a great deal of hesitation and doubt, Harry slowly opened the door, trusting in both Dumbledore's oath and Meciél's advice.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with amusement as he cheerfully strode into the apartment, seemingly surveying everything with a mere glance. Harry's face looked as if it could have been carved from stone as he slammed his door shut.

"This is a very nice apartment, Harry," Dumbledore said politely. "May I ask- do you rent this or are you the owner?"

"Technically, I'm renting out," Harry said neutrally. "In reality, the landlord recently received a check that covered the cost of this place- I got it pretty cheap too, probably because there's no electricity here. But the law says that minors can't own their own apartments, which is bullshit, in my opinion. Still, a few bribes here and there and I've got what I want."

"Ah, electricity, the lifeblood of the muggles," Dumbledore murmured. He looked very out of place in Harry's living room, with his tall frame and brightly-coloured robes. "Is there a reason you forgo modern technology for the radiance of the simple candle?"

"Eh, you know how electricity responds to true-magic," Harry said with a raised eyebrow. He scoffed. "Things would be blowing up by the shit-loads. I can't really afford to be replacing them all the time."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "Our wand-magic produces a much, similar effect, although, it takes large quantities of magic before it is visible. Even then, our brand of magic tends to negate electricity as apposed to the rather...violent...reactions of true-magic. It is all to do with the source of the magic. True-magic is a product of this world, of life and love and, to some, of death and suffering. Wand-magic, however, is siphoned from another realm through the use of our wands. There are several key debates over the..."

"Right," Harry interrupted loudly, staring at Dumbledore with a rather pointed expression on his face. "I'm sure you didn't come here to debate magical theory with me. Remember, five minutes...well, four minutes, and counting."

"Very well," Dumbledore said and motioned to one of the armchairs in the living room. "May I sit?"

"I'd prefer it if you did," Harry said and flashed Dumbledore a chilling smile as he fingered his wand. "Although I doubt you would be dumb enough to pull anything in my own, heavily warded apartment."

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said as he eased himself into the chair. "I am most impressed, Harry. It was very difficult to find you, very difficult indeed."

"How did you find me?" Harry demanded, his polite manner disappearing as he scowled at Dumbledore. "And did you tell anybody, because I like this place and it would be a pity if I had to kill some stupid bint of a wizard who wanted to snoop around."

"You didn't think I would let you leave without some way of tracking you?" Dumbledore asked, his lips twitching as he stroked his beard, his eyes dancing with amusement. "Once I determined the exact nature of the entity protecting you from detection, it was a simple matter- for me, at least- utilising the right contacts to find you."

"Right. Contacts," Harry muttered in disgust, rolling his eyes. He half-heartedly gestured to the grubby kitchen. "I'd offer you a drink, but I'm a lazy, selfish, ungrateful bastard who would probably slip some kind of slow-working poison into the cup and watch you die."

"Then it is good that I am not thirsty," Dumbledore replied merrily.

Harry almost gagged at the other man's good mood but he restrained himself. His expression hardened as he held out his hand, his eyes icy cold. "About that sack of gold you said you would give to me..."

'It's good to know you have your priorities in order,' Meciél whispered into his ear.

'Oh, shut up,' Harry thought crossly. 'You weren't complaining when I bought the silk sheets.'

"Well, they are smooth on the skin," Meciél said and paused. 'Yes, beloved, I know- some clever little sex joke. Now, perhaps you should catch that bag...'

Harry blinked and refocussed his eyes to see that Dumbledore's twinkle had dimmed and he was reaching into his robes. He pulled out the small, bulging sack and threw it towards Harry. Harry caught it in a deft movement and, keeping a wary eye on Dumbledore, glanced inside.

"That's a lot of gold," Harry muttered and felt Meciél pulse in agreement. He tested the weight of the sack while Dumbledore watched on.

"It's one-thousand gold galleons," The wizened Headmaster said from where he sat. He clasped his hands together and, after a pause, continued. "I do find it disturbing that you are easily appeased by such...material...gains. It is not a good outlook to have in life."

"Well, it's not like I can rob a bank or something," Harry said defensively, throwing Dumbledore an irritated scowl. "I mean, I really can't. The American Aurors would be clued in if a guy using magic started stealing from muggles and I wouldn't be able to do it without magic."

"Hence, your work with Ms Carpenter and her associates over the summer," Dumbledore observed neutrally, staring at Harry with an expression too hard for the Denarian Knight to decipher.

"Why am I not surprised you know that?" Harry muttered absently and threw the bag of gold onto the kitchen bench. It made a loud clinking noise as Harry turned around and stared at Dumbledore with a pleased expression. "Yeah, the money was good. It went too soon, with the apartment, some decent food and the legions of prostitutes. The killing part was fun too."

'Sex, sex, sex,' Meciél grumbled. 'People would be very surprised to learn that you have only had it once.'

'Tell anybody and die,' Harry threatened menacingly. He paused. 'Please?'

'Oh, beloved,' Meciél sighed in exasperation. 'You can be quite pathetic sometimes.'

'Pathetic as in, sad, despicable and intolerable pathetic or pathetic as in 'cute-shivering-puppy at the doorstep' pathetic?' Harry thought and almost grinned when he felt Meciél's amusement.

'I haven't decided yet,' Meciél said dryly.

Harry refocussed his attention, which had wavered for all but a split second, back on Dumbledore, who was watching him with a knowing expression on his face. Harry stared back challengingly but Dumbledore let the issue drop.

"Enjoy your gold then," Dumbledore said and a flash of wicked amusement splashed across his pleasant expression as he stepped his fingers together. "After all, you have earned it."

"What do you mean?" Harry said slowly, his smile dimming as he glanced at the bag of gold.

"They are your winnings for coming first place in the Tri-wizard Tournament," Dumbledore responded honestly, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

"Hang on," Harry said slowly, his gaze flying back to the sack of money as comprehension dawned on his face. "This was already mine?"

"Yes," Dumbledore answered cheerfully.

"Son of a bitch," Harry muttered, anger and annoyance flaring in his mind. For a second, he felt the urge to strike out at the old mage but a combination of common sense and Meciél's blazing warmth, which almost immediately calmed him down, held his wand. Instead, through gritted teeth, he growled, "We have names for people like you."

"Do you?" Dumbledore asked and smiled benignly, leaning back in the chair and looking extremely comfortable.

“Let me see if I can think of a few,” Harry said slowly, pausing and placing a mocking frown on his face. “Well, there’s manipulative bastard, old coot, old man, senile prick, Dumbledork, Dumb-dore, Dumblefuck, Dumble-bore, Dumble-don’t, Dumbles...basically anything that we can run off your name. My favourite would have to be ‘Dirty, perverted, goat-fucker’.”

‘I have an idea, beloved,’ Meciél offered. ‘Why don’t you just spit on him instead? It would be much quicker and just as offensive.’

‘You know what...’ Harry thought speculatively and suppressed a smile when he heard Meciél’s snort of laughter. He refocussed his attention back on Dumbledore in less than a second, catching him raising his eyebrows.

“I see you heard of the rather...disturbing rumours surrounding my brother,” He said evenly.

“You have a brother?” Harry asked in surprise. He shook his head as if to clear off the thought and glanced at his watch. “Okay, you have two minutes to get to the point.”

“Do you know of a Denarian called Vesper?” Dumbledore asked immediately, his eyes trained on Harry as he catalogued the boy’s every movement. In turn, Harry watched Dumbledore closely for any hint of the older man’s plans and kept his wand ready.

“We’ve had dealings in the past,” Harry admitted slowly. “And when I say we, I mean Meciél.”

“Are you allies?” Dumbledore asked carefully.

“Was Mary a real virgin?” Harry retorted and scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “I think not. She was just as much of a skank as any other prostitute.”

‘Oh, do tell that to one of the Knights,’ Meciél said with wicked delight.

"Were I catholic, I would have some very serious things to say about that presumption," Dumbledore said quietly. "Nonetheless, I am glad that you are not friends with this woman. I have recently learned that she has made an alliance with Lord Voldemort and the central most unifying factor holding them together is their mutual hatred and desire to kill you."

"Yeah, tell me something I don't know," Harry snorted and smiled smugly at Dumbledore's faint expression of surprise. "Yeah, I have contacts too, Dumbledore."

"You don't seem so concerned," Dumbledore noted.

"Me and Vesper would kill each other in a heartbeat, no matter whose allies we were," Harry scoffed, waving his hand dismissively. "And Voldemort, well, I kicked his arse when he was hyped up on Azzeh-crack. If they want me as an enemy, then let them bring it on."

"I will admit that I know very little of this Vesper," Dumbledore said, his voice soft, urgent. "But I warn you, do not underestimate Lord Voldemort. His power and cunning was is no less than it was last time and he brought about a period of fear and terror that has never left the heart of the Wizarding World."

"Yeah, whatever," Harry scoffed, but some part of him felt uneasy at Dumbledore's warning. He covered it up by raising an eyebrow and glancing at his watch. "Wow. You spent one minute telling me I already know."

"Are you aware of the Ministry of Magic's current position on the return of Lord Voldemort?" Dumbledore asked, peering at Harry behind delicate half-moon glasses.

"Do I care?" Harry asked, with a shake of his head. "Am I...am I caring here?"

"They have not acknowledged his existence," Dumbledore continued, ignoring Harry's mutter. "Instead of moving quickly and presenting a unified front in which to wage war, Minister Fudge has instead moved

onto what can only be described as a smear campaign designed to discredit both you and me.”

“Me?” Harry asked in surprise. He made a scoffing noise and waved it away. “Fine. Let him. But who’ll be laughing when Voldemort is standing over Fudge’s bleeding, mutilated husk of a human body, listening to the Minister’s pleas for mercy? I tell you who, me.”

“You don’t care?” Dumbledore asked, sounding quite shocked. “Harry, the man killed your parents.”

“I’ll admit, the short-term effects of that were pretty bad,” Harry admitted, but then shrugged his shoulders. “Long-term wise, I should thank him. If I had parents, no Dursleys, no Dursleys, no walking by that car park that day, no walking by that car park that day, no coin, no coin, no Meciél.”

‘I’m touched,’ Meciél said dryly, but Harry felt a flash of affection seep from her presence. ‘You’d rather have me the power I can give you than your parents.’

‘Well, you’re pretty much my mother/sister/best friend anyway,’ Harry responded. ‘You’ve probably done a better job than they would have anyway.’

Meciél was quiet and Harry couldn’t detect any of her emotions. Concern filled his mind and he tentatively reached out for her presence. Suddenly, her blazing power shot out and snatched his mind, dragging him into the centre of her heat and embracing him.

‘You make it so very hard for me to stay exasperated at you,’ Meciél said softly.

‘Imagine the sex,’ Harry said and grinned, both mentally and physically. ‘Kinky, eh?’

‘And some times, you make it so very easy,’ Meciél finished, but she clutched Harry’s consciousness to her presence and only let him go with some reluctance.

“So,” Harry said out loud, aware that he was grinning quite manically. “Let’s cut to the chase.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said and adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his long, crooked nose. “I am the leader of a group called the Order of Phoenix. Your parents too once belonged to this group. Contrary to the Ministry of Magic, we recognise the return of Lord Voldemort and ready ourselves to combat both him and his servants. However, the Denarian Vesper has led us into a quandary. We do not know of her powers and abilities. We do not know if she is working alone or if she has other forces lying in wait.”

“You want me to tell you that?” Harry asked and made a loud, derisive noise. “I don’t know. It’s been a few decades since she and Meciél last met.”

“If you don’t know, then I would like you to find out,” Dumbledore answered and paused, raising a hand to stilling Harry’s next comment. “As you said, you have contacts and connections into worlds of magic I dare not delve. I am confident in your ability to discover what I need to know. For your work, I offer you another one-thousand gold galleons.”

Harry scoffed derisively but frowned and stared at Dumbledore in interest. The old man seemed quite sincere in his promise. Within his mind, Meciél chose this moment of silence to speak.

‘I suggest that you take the deal, beloved,’ she advised. ‘After all, I was going to have you do as such regardless of Dumbledore’s intentions. It is good to know your enemies, after all.’

“Five thousand,” Harry suddenly said and Dumbledore blinked.

“Ah, Harry,” He said, a benign smile appearing on his face. “My pockets are not that deep, I’m afraid. Two thousand.”

“Four thousand,” Harry shot back and smiled coldly. “They better dig a little deeper if you want this information.”

"Twenty-five hundred," Dumbledore answered back calmly, steeping his fingers together and staring at Harry over his glasses. "And no higher."

"Three thousand," Harry said with a challenging shrug of his head. His eyes glittered as they surveyed Dumbledore, but the old man had chosen to stand his ground.

"Twenty-five hundred," Dumbledore repeated and smiled politely at Harry's annoyed scowl. "Really, Harry. That is the equivalent of twenty-five thousand American dollars. You are quite clearly robbing me."

"Two-thousand five-hundred galleons," Harry agreed carefully and added "But only if you convert that into twenty-five thousand dollars. American, of course, at an exchange rate of one galleon to ten bucks."

"Agreed," Dumbledore said and smiled. He rose from his seat and had a quick look at a pocket watch clasped to his one of his pockets. "And I do believe my time here is up. Send me an owl when you are ready to make the transaction and I will contact you. Should you have any immediate concerns, I can also be contacted through Ms Carpenter and her father."

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Oh, yes," Dumbledore answered, his eyes twinkling. He walked to the door and paused. "There are some at Hogwarts who miss you, Harry. Granted, there are some that do not but it is better to reflect on the positive things in life. Don't you agree?"

"You can go now," Harry said sharply and Dumbledore smiled.

"Good day, Harry," He said and then he was gone, his purple and silver robes disappearing out of Harry's doorway. Harry raised his wand and slammed the door shut and took a deep breath.

"So, fruit?" He questioned.

‘Don’t forget the yoghurt.’

A/N: Thanks for World at DLP for fixing up a great number of grammar mistakes in this chapter. I go for my first exam on Thursday, so those who like me can wish me luck, those who hate me can try to psych me out and those who don't care can don't care.

Harry was approaching the end of the chant, a series of lilting musical syllables that were almost too complex for the human ear to decipher. The chant echoed around the spacious living as Harry snapped off the last word, something sounding both similar to 'Cessbulby' yet so completely different. Power reverberated throughout the room, focussed true-magic as Harry continued to work the spell and create a rift between the real world and that of the Nevernever, the world of faeries, demons and other entities that he could only dream of. Harry's lack of innate talent and ability was balanced by his access to potent Hellfire, which was more than enough to seek out and bind the creature he needed to interrogate.

'Here it comes,' Meciell said softly, her voice whispering into Harry's ear.

Harry didn't need to be told and he pushed his emotions and thoughts away, concentrating solely on keeping the summoning circle secure. A faint splash of crimson and yellow light flickered through the air, little burst of energy sparkling through the air. The summoning circle was made of simple yet sturdy ring of copper and encompassed most of the now-bare living room. A circle of intricate runic symbols had been carved into the wooden floorboard, and these had started to glow with a faint silvery light. The thick curtains, permanently spelled over the window, fluttered as a soft icy wind as the light began to grow brighter and brighter with each second. From within the silver glow came a showering cloud of sparkling silver motes, which disappeared as it touched the ground with soft pops and short, tiny blinks of light.

And then, it came.

Harry caught a glimpse of red, blue and silver blur as the light receded and he lowered his hand, a crude ring of crudely constructed piece of metal with a small gem set in the middle flickering with the last vestiges of light. The focus, the first Harry had ever built, had

been Harry's only source of channelling true-magic since his blade was destroyed by Voldemort. Truthfully, Harry had thought he had thrown it away until he had found it in a corner collecting up dust. Since he had been too lazy to construct a new one, the ring suddenly became useful once more.

'Oh dear,' Meciél said blandly. 'I think it looks upset.'

"What?" Harry said in surprise and instinctively flinched as the blur slammed into the barrier separating Harry from the summoning circle.

He took a step backwards, a cautious frown on his face as he watched the blur zip around the barrier, occasionally slamming into it and producing a sizzling flash of crimson light. Finally, the blur halted directly in front of Harry's face and Harry got a glimpse of what he had just summoned. It was a beautiful humanoid faery, no bigger than six inches, with a shaggy, silken mane of pinkish red hair. Glittering dragonfly wings protruded from her back and her eyes were of a luminous blue.

"Cessbulby," Harry greeted with a raised eyebrow, feeling a little amused at the faery's antics. While all faeries were absolutely not to be trusted, Harry had to admit that he had a fond spot for this particular one, both because she was a delightful little bloody-thirsty sociopath and because she had access to the deepest heart of the Winter Court's intelligence operations.

"You!" Cess barked out, her voice far too high-pitched to be any threateningly. She added in a few choice curse-words that had Harry blinking in surprise at the sheer filth of them all before folding her tiny arms over her little body and pouting.

"I'm touched that you've missed me," Harry said dryly.

"Do you know how long it's been since I've had yoghurt?" Cess demanded. She blew Harry a loud raspberry and with a flick of her wings, threw a hail of silver motes at him. They burst out of existence as soon as they touched the shimmering barrier with soft, harmless pops. "I thought we had a deal."

“We do,” Harry said patiently, exhaling loudly. He pointed to the centre of the circle and gave his best smile. “See, there’s some fresh fruit and yoghurt now. Why don’t you go and eat and we’ll talk...”

Cessbubly moved as a blur of flapping wings, silver motes and pink hair and had dived at the tray of food before Harry had even finished his sentence. She tore into it with great vigour, food literally flying through the air as the tiny little faery hurled great portions of fruit dripping with yoghurt into her tiny mouth.

“Later,” Harry finished slowly and watched with barely concealed disgust as Cess shoved an entire strawberry into her mouth. He shook his head, partly in bewilderment and partly in genuine curiosity. “I bet she’s really popular with the boy faeries.”

Harry had summoned every ounce of patience he possessed as he listened to Cess chatter. He had lowered the protective circle to bring out more food as Cess gorged herself. The tiny faerie was casually sitting inside the half-eaten yogurt, her little dress splattered with the juices of an entire fruit salad. Little goblets of yogurt and the mangled remains of the fruit that Harry had bought littered the ground around her.

“...and Maeve is really, really busy now,” Cess said with a slight giggle and threw Harry a shrewd look. “We all had fun watching you two sport with each other. Really, there was only one thing better....”

“I don’t really want to hear about Maeve,” Harry said, raising his hand and interrupting Cess quickly with a pained expression on his face. Meciél was flickering with irritation and amusement within his mind, her feelings about the Winter Lady quite clear.

“But...” Cess whined.

“Tell me about Vesper,” Harry said firmly. Cess made a scoffing noise and pouted like a child as she folded her arms. She shook her head childishly before giving Harry an impish grin and buzzing her wings a few times.

"You're going to be sorry," she said in a singsong voice. She buzzed her wings again and jumped out of the yoghurt bowl, pausing to flick a small goblet of juice off her arm and then rising to hover in front of Harry's face. "But since you asked, then I'll tell you what I've managed to peak out of Maeve's scrying mirrors. Vesper killed Balthrail."

"Shit," Harry muttered and frowned. Of the thirty Denarians in existence, only three had ever managed to gain any form of clout or control over their brethren. Of those three, Nicodemus had been killed by Harry last year and now Balthrail had been killed by Vesper.

'With both Balthrail and Nicodemus gone, Vesper is now the leading power of the Denarian factions. She could unite them all and gather them against you,' Meciell said worryingly and paused. 'It might be prudent to inform you that while all Denarians despise me, Vesper's hatred of me knows no bounds.'

'Of course she hates you,' Harry thought snippily. 'Who the hell doesn't anyway?'

"What can you tell me about the other Denarian?" He continued, ducking out of his thoughts and addressing the little faery buzzing in front of them. "Who have you seen working for Vesper?"

"Ooh, there are lots of them, lots and lots," Cess said excitedly, animatedly gesturing with her hands. Her blue gaze glazed over as she began reciting a list of names. "There's Berith, Verrine, Gressil, Marchosias, Gaap, Belphegor, Poldriul and Sammerial. That's all I saw, anyway."

'Verrine, Gaap and Poldriul have always been Vesper's servants,' Meciell said thoughtfully. 'Gressil and Marchosias were very strong supporters of Balthrail and Sammerial, Belphegor and Berith are, simply put, insane. They will follow whoever can give them blood.'

"That's gotta be half of the free Denarians," Harry said grimly and sighed, unconsciously fingering his wand as his mind whirled with a dozen possible scenarios. "This could get tricky."

‘You do have the sword of the Knight’s,’ Meciél reminded him gently. ‘And your skills are quite formidable. With my power, you could crush most of them quite easily. Alongside Vesper, only Verrine and Gressil would give you the most trouble. The rest are half-insane or worse, at best.’

‘Not anxious much or anything?’ Harry thought carefully.

‘I have waited a long time for my revenge,’ Meciél said and Harry was struck with a flash of hatred so vast that it made even him shudder. There was cold steel in Meciél’s voice as she continued. ‘There are issues between my kin that must be resolved, and resolve them I shall, with blood, fire and death.’ Her voice then became gentler, although no less determined. ‘However, I am patient. I have waited a four thousand years for my revenge. Before, when I acted out of haste, my hosts were all killed. I will not permit you to fall, beloved, so I will wait a little longer.’

“Okay....” Harry trailed off slowly. But concern tingled in his heart and he cautiously reached out for Meciél’s presence only to find her blocking him off as she retreated into the forefront of Harry’s mind. He sighed and turned back to Cess. “What else do you know?”

Cess made a pouting noise, buzzing high and out of Harry’s reach. She stared down at him with childish hurt in her eyes and crossed her arms against her tiny chest.

“You could be nicer to me,” she said sulkily, absently running a hand over her yoghurt splattered leg and licking it off her finger. “Ooh, there was strawberry in that. I like strawberry.”

“Um...Cess?” Harry asked and Cess blinked. A bright smile crossed her face as her little tantrum was instantly forgotten and she came buzzing down.

“Yes, Harry?” She asked squeakily and frowned, her mind jumping from one topic to the next. “Did I ever tell you about the time I stabbed a summer pixie with my spear, then coated him with honey and ate him? Because that was nice...could you make me that sometime?”

“Great,” Harry said after a moment’s pause. He stared at Cess with a strange expression on his face and then sighed. “Cannibalism aside, do you have anything else for me?”

“Ah,” Cess said and wagged a finger in front of Harry’s face. “Only what I see, remember?”

Harry sighed and bit his lip in thought. Suddenly a thought occurred to him, probably prodded there by a helpful Meciél, and he smiled.

“When you saw the other Denarians,” Harry began slowly. “Just where exactly did you see them?”

“I was hoping you would say that,” Cess said with an impish grin and zoomed forward with a blur, landing and nestling herself in his hair. “You see, there’s this club that Vesper goes to all of the time...”

“The Rainbow Crow?” Harry muttered, peering through the darkness and staring at the large building in front of him. He was hiding behind a tree on the other side of the road, perhaps five-hundred metres down from the entrance of the club. He could hear the loud thump of the rock music from where he was standing. It was a busy street that night and there was a long queue of young skimpy-dressed females and burly men, all who were looking impatient as the bouncer, a large, thick-muscled man, took his time letting them in.

‘It certainly is...artistic,’ Meciél said in amusement. ‘Is this really what’s popular these days?’

“I don’t know,” Harry muttered, raking a hand through his head as he carefully analysed the outside of the club. “I’m a little out of the loop.”

‘That is true,’ Meciél said and paused. ‘Besides, it can’t be any worse than the Seventies. Disco was an enjoyable past-time for my host and, for a short while, the bane of my existence. He could simply not get the fact that he looked like a complete moron.’

"You know, you never really talk about him much," Harry murmured, ducking behind the tree to avoid the headlights of a passing car. "Your former host, I mean."

'There is no need,' Meciél replied softly. 'He was an adequate host, perhaps not as entertaining as you are but twice as obedient. His magical skills were not impressive but I sensed that he would have had great potential in the future. His death was necessary though, otherwise we would never have become one.'

"That sounds so dirty," Harry murmured and let a smile cross his face as Meciél's amusement drifted into his cognitive senses. He peered around the tree again and shook his head at the club's horrible appearance. To Harry, it seemed as if a dozen people had opened up cans of paint from all the colours of the rainbow and then threw it on the walls without a care in the world. "You know, I bet the painters were Mexican."

'Intolerance,' Meciél mused, 'is evil's most treasured gift.'

"Well then, you're in luck," Harry muttered softly to himself as he ducked out of the tree and began walking to the club. "I have intolerance by the bucket's loads, and in all different kinds of flavours."

'So I've noted,' Meciél muttered.

Harry bypassed the line completely, ignoring the dirty looks he was receiving, and strode right up to the bouncer, the cane-sheath clicking loudly on the ground. The burly man stared down at him with an exasperated look on his face.

"No kids, pal," He said and jerked his thumb. "Beat it."

"There are two definitions of pal," Harry said coldly, his eyes glinting as he stared down the other man. "There's the 'friend, buddy, pal!' type of pal and then there's the dog-food. To you, I'm neither."

"Look..." The bouncer started to speak with a touch of menace in his voice, and he flexed his muscles as he stared down at Harry.

“Go get Vesper,” Harry interrupted with a bored expression on his face, waving the bouncer off with an imperious wave of his hand. He idly glanced at his surroundings, noting that many of the people in the line were glaring at him.

“What?” The bouncer started, stiffening up and staring at Harry with a little more caution. Harry could tell that the man was a trained fighter as he shifted on his feet, moving into a fighting stance and clenching his fists.

“Vesper,” Harry articulated slowly, staring at the man as if he were a moron. “The owner of the club. The woman I know is in there. Go tell her that an agent of Meciél wants to speak with her. Now.”

The man narrowed his eyes but pulled out a walkie-talkie from his belt and began to speak to somebody on the other end. Harry stood there and waited, not letting an inch of emotion show on his face as he placed his hand in his pocket, clenching his wand. Past his blank eyes, Harry sought out Meciél’s presence with no small amount of hesitation and nervousness.

‘So, are you sure she won’t kill me?’ Harry thought carefully. ‘Because, I would...if I were her, I mean. Although, if I were her, I might not...I’d get too distracted playing with my breasts all day.’

‘This club is part of the neutral accords,’ Meciél explained with the patient air of somebody who had been over it a thousand times beforehand. ‘Inside, prominent members of the Vampire Courts, Order of Blackened Denarius, businessmen, mobsters, even Faeries, meet and make alliances that shape the world. In her current position, Vesper would not dare to break these accords, not when she is trying to consolidate her power.’

‘Oh,’

‘That said, she does possess somewhat of an irrational hatred towards me,’ Meciél thought and Harry felt her amusement...and satisfaction. ‘I can’t imagine why.’

“Always a catch,” Harry muttered sourly and drew away from Meciél. He blinked as the bouncer lowered his walkie-talkie and gestured Harry forward.

“Alright, Vesper will see you,” He said. Harry gave the man a little satisfying smile and made to move forward, but the bouncer halted him and narrowed his eyes at the cane in his hand. “Whoa, what’s that? I won’t believe for a second that you’re disabled.”

“Dude,” Harry exclaimed with an easy grin. He clapped the man on the shoulders and smiled brilliantly at him. “It’s my pimp-cane.” He smirked at the bouncer’s blink of shock. “You see, Vesper is my bitch.”

“Just get the hell in,” the bouncer muttered and stood back, allowing Harry to pass.

“What the hell do you think I was trying to do, dumbarse?” Harry muttered under his breath and strode into the club.

The inside of the club was full of thunderous, beating music. A band dressed in stripped leathers performed on the stage, their long hair flying as they poured their souls into their music. A shower of glowing sparks shot out of the stage as they struck a particularly loud chord, and the crowd before them screamed in applause. A bar had been built into the back of the club and past that was a small lounge, occupied with couples desperately trying to suck the lips of the other person. Harry saw dilated pupils and red faces everywhere he looked. In one corner, a man was surreptitiously injecting a needle into his arm; another was staggering drunkenly towards the crowd in the other.

“What a fucking dive,” Harry muttered sourly and wrinkled his nose at the smell of sweat, alcohol and fast food. He strode through the crowd, knocking people aside if they got in his way, and aimed for the bar.

‘Snobbery from you,’ Meciél said with a snort. ‘That’s rich. I have seen the way you keep the apartment.’

‘Meciel, I don’t live like that because I choose to,’ Harry thought patiently. ‘I live like that because I’m lazy.’

‘Of course,’ Meciel murmured sardonically. ‘Forgive me.’

“Hey!” Somebody bellowed, although Harry barely heard them over the distorted sound of guitars and mindless screaming. He turned around to see a tall, lithe man wearing a distinguished suit and a no-nonsense expression on his face. “You’re Meciel’s boy?”

“That’d be me,” Harry drawled and gave the man a once-over glance.

It was faint but both Harry and Meciel could sense the darkness within him, a darkness that both were particularly familiar with. He was a Denarian. Although Meciel couldn’t recall his host’s face, she knew the presence quite well.

“So, you’re Marchosias,” Harry said and paused, curling his lip in derision. “Vesper’s little bitch.”

“You watch your mouth you little fucking punk!” The man snarled, his eyes brewing with rage his face distorted with anger. There was a spark of yellow behind the man’s pupils and Harry knew that he had just grasped Hellfire. He made to do the same but just as soon as it had come, it was gone and the man’s face was blank. When he next spoke, the voice was smooth and cultured.

“Forgive my host, Meciel,” The man said with an expressionless face. “He angers quite easily. Vesper will see you now.”

“Lead on,” Harry said and gestured for Marchosias to move. The man thronged his way past the crowd and led them towards a plain unmarked door at the back of the club. Harry’s sharp eyes noted a faint line of runes carved into the wooden frame and felt a multitude of wards lift as the man opened the door.

“Come,” Marchosias ordered and noted Harry’s hesitation. “Believe me, Meciel, if we were not going to follow the accords, then you would already be dead. Come.”

“Alright,” Harry said crossly. His cane shot up and he jabbed the end of it in the other man’s chest as he made his next point with ice in his voice. “But if I’m betrayed...you’ll be the first to die, I promise you.”

Marchosias rocked on his feet and Harry saw a glimpse of emotion behind the stony mask. Feeling quite self-satisfied at unsettling the other Denarian, Harry took a deep breath and strode forward to meet one of his greatest enemies for the first time in his life.

The room inside was nothing short of lavish. It was a small lounge, complete with an assortment of leather chairs and couches. A small, private bar had been set up in the corner and a fireplace blazed in the corner, more sentimental than practical. Silk hangings drifted from the roof and when Harry glanced up, he could see the night sky.

“Do you know you have a large hole in your roof?” He asked Marchosias, but the Denarian ignored him and strode to the centre of the room, where a single woman waited for him. Harry ignored the throbbing beat that resounded throughout the club as he saw Vesper with his own eyes for the first time.

She stood before him in a light wavy dress of almost-transparent grey silk, her voluptuous chest barely concealed by the hazy fabric. Her beautiful blue eyes seemed to throb with innate power, inhuman at best, and her hair gave her the appearance that she had just walked through a gale. Sitting on her shoulders was a small bird with grey feathers and a wicked-looking beak. Harry glanced at it for a brief second; his mind still tightly wrapped around Hellfire, and sensed the dark currents of powers that ran under its feathers and cold black eyes.

‘Accursed bitch!’ Meciél snarled into his head, an outburst of pure, blinding rage. Harry could feel her rear up in his head, her mighty presence almost demanding that he lash out at her. Instead, though, he did his best to block it out and, with a lazy smirk on his face, eyed Vesper’s body with an appreciative glance.

“So,” Harry drawled slowly and gave her his best suggestive smile. “As one Denarian host to another, let’s say we ditch these Fallen, who only want to throw their little temper-tantrums, and, how does

one put it," Harry trailed off with a thoughtful expression on his face. "Ah, yes, have sex."

"I'm afraid, little boy, that the one you are speaking to no longer exists," Vesper said quietly. Her soft voice was much like her appearance, breezy and unthreatening, but the smile she gave Harry was nothing short of predatory. "She was such a foolish little girl, wanting to be more beautiful than her sisters and unaware of her vast magical potential. She was easily seduced and when I was through with her, she all but begged me to destroy her mind. So I did."

Harry squared his shoulders, his face falling blank as he regarded Vesper a little more carefully. The bird jumped off the other Denarian's shoulder and glided across the room. An almost unnoticeable shudder ran through him but Vesper seemed to notice and smiled cruelly.

'Meciel, if I ever say that you're terrible to me then I want you to backslap me,' He thought with all seriousness.

'Agreed,' Meciel replied quietly.

However, Vesper didn't seem to be offended and gave Harry a soft, sexy smile. She glided forward in a slow, sensuous movement, her blue eyes boring into him as the thin fabric of her dress fluttered around her. She pressed her voluptuous chest against Harry's and stroked his expressionless face with the back of her hand.

"Still, you are quite pretty," she mused and she gave a smile filled with a thousand different promises. The smile quickly transformed to one of malice as her voice hitched with hatred. "Even if you are hosting that traitorous whore!" Her voice softened and lowered as she finished. "If you are still interested, I could show you things that you would never dream of. After all, I have had thousands of years to perfect my...technique."

"Hmm," Harry uttered slowly, nodding in what seemed like thoughtfulness. "How about I stick my dick in cheese-grater instead? It will be less painful and I won't catch anything rancid off it."

Vesper's smile dropped and she hissed as if she had been struck. Her eyes flickered with an odd yellow light and Harry almost frowned, but continued on and appraised Vesper carefully.

"You're not really my type anyway, although I do like these..." He drawled slowly and raised his hands, quite deliberately slipping them inside her dress and squeezing her voluptuous breasts. Vesper stared at him as if she couldn't feel him groping her body, hatred flaring in her eyes.

"But..." Harry continued and his hands trailed over her skinny arms with a sympathetic expression. "There's lithe, Vesper, and then there's anorexic. You look like you're wasting away. Have you ever thought of eating a cheeseburger or something?"

'Oh, she is wasting away,' Meciell said with quiet satisfaction and Harry was surprised at the amount of cruelty and pleasure in her voice. 'I saw to that.'

"Your Fallen saw to that!" Vesper hissed and yanked Harry's arm away, taking a step backwards. The other Denarian's fury only seemed to grow and her voice reverberated with a shrill, unholy tone that slammed into Harry's mind with great force. It was only Meciell's presence that allowed Harry to stand on his two feet as Vesper loomed over him, spittle flying from her mouth. "How dare you touch me like that, you, some pathetic, insignificant mortal touch the receptacle of my celestial being?"

Harry stared with wide eyes and shock rocked his mind as Vesper underwent a transformation before his very eyes. Her skin darkened with sickly, faded splotches, like very old bruises, and her eyes tightened up together, sky-blue fading into a cruel yellow. Harry noted from the corner of his eye that Marchosias had ducked his head and was doing his best to ignore the newly-revealed Vesper.

"Your...receptacle...looks like it could use some surgery," Harry said slowly, taking a wary step backwards. He ran his eyes over Vesper and grimaced. "Okay, lots of surgery."

"It is the curse," Vesper snarled with rage, her cruel yellow eyes flickering with Hellfire. "Her curse- Meciel's curse!"

"Meciel did this to you?" Harry asked slowly, taking in Vesper's appearance. "Why don't you get a new body then?"

"You stupid imbecile," Vesper snapped, but her immediate rage had disappeared. "She did not curse the body, she cursed the coin! Forever will my receptacles fall victim to this...accursed state as long as I remain present!"

"Okay," Harry drawled slowly, eying Vesper carefully. "Am I going have to kill you now? It'd be bad for the accords, but hey, it's not like I'm used to having people wanting to kill me."

Vesper smiled coldly and took a deep breath, her eyes fluttering shut. After a few more breaths, the sickly splotches on her skin faded away back into a creamy, pale flesh. When Vesper opened her eyes they were once more blue and were staring at Harry, or more specifically, Harry's cane.

"It's my pimp cane," Harry explained after seeing her glance. "For my hoes. A brother's gotta respect his homies, yo?" He paused at the expression on Vesper's face and shrugged his shoulders. "Don't worry, I don't know what I just said either."

"So, you are a knight," Vesper mused and shook her head in disgust. She strode across the lavish lounge and with a flick of her hand, summoned a glass of sparkling wine into her outstretched hand. "I admit, it befuddles the mind, it truly does. How does a Denarian, one of us, become a Knight of the Cross?"

"I'm not a Knight," Harry scoffed, waving the idea away with his hand. "I use one of their swords, sure, but mercy, forgiveness, love and all that crap? I'd rather...well... rather fuck a cheese-grater. It's funny how you said that though. Sort of like that you almost knew what happened?"

Vesper didn't say a word but Harry caught a glance of her lips curling up as she took a sip of her wine.

"The only way you could have heard that if you've been in contact with somebody who saw me use it," Harry concluded thoughtfully and held his hand up. "He's about this high, pale skin, slit-like nose, dreamy crimson eyes, likes long walks on the beach, holding hands and expressing his feelings in a variety of many different lethal spells."

"Lord Voldemort and I have entered into a business arrangement, yes," Vesper said abruptly. "How you believe that concerns you, I have no idea."

"It concerns me because, apparently, you two have allied to kill me," Harry replied grimly, narrowing his eyes. "That makes it my business."

"Oh, you poor fool," Vesper said with a light laugh. She lowered her glass and, with a careless wave of her hand, sent it soaring back to the table. "Are you that arrogant as to believe that I would enter an alliance merely so I could kill you? Oh, Meciél has not conditioned you well."

"So you're not trying to kill me?" Harry asked sceptically and snorted. "I find that hard to believe."

"Of course I'm trying to kill you," Vesper answered honestly, a cruel smile on her face. "I despise Meciél and you haven't exactly left me a good first impression. But there is much more to our alliance than just you. Obviously, your sources aren't as thorough as you thought."

"Vesper..." Harry started with a low growl.

"Enough!" Vesper snapped and Harry fell silent as her skin flickered with the blotches. Her eyes wavered between cruel yellow and soft blue. "I don't know what you intended to gain from coming here, but I can tell you what you have gained. You have gained my ire, my notice and my wrath!"

‘I think you should leave,’ Meciél said worryingly. ‘If she continues then she will lose her temper and believe me, beloved, once she has lost her temper then it is very hard for her to regain control.’

“It’s like a supermarket, isn’t it?” Harry said blandly. He made a show of raising his hand to check at a non-existent watch. “Anyway, I’ve left my oven on so I might leave now...okay,” he said slowly at Vesper’s glare, raising his hand in a placating gesture. “I’m really going to a brothel, since I didn’t pick up any here. I’ll catch you later, Vesper.”

“Count on it,” Vesper promised quietly. Her arm lashed out and she pulled Harry in, her yellow eyes boring into his face. “I promise you, renegade, the next time we meet, you will die and Meciél suffer as I have suffered for the rest of eternity,”

“We’ll see, won’t we,” Harry said just as quietly. Vesper sneered and pushed him away, abruptly spinning around and gesturing to Marchosias. The Denarian, who had been completely silent, rose to his feet and stared at Vesper calmly.

“Get him out of here,” she snapped.

“So, who did you see?” Harry muttered under his breath as he stalked out of the club. Hellfire blazed in his mind and an invisible barrier of magic surrounded his form, designed specifically to stop anybody putting a bullet in his exposed back.

‘Several influential members of the Red Court, some corporate businessmen, a rogue warlock that I have met previously, three Denarians and a Winter Faerie in disguise,’ Meciél said worryingly. ‘She is forming her connections and building her empire.’

“Was it worth it?” Harry asked with resignation as he approached the cluster of trees where he had hidden himself before.

‘I believe so.’

Neither of them noticed a grey and red blur shoot from the bar as he disappeared. Vesper’s bird’s eyes gleamed with dark power as it

soared into the night sky and circled the bar once, before shooting off into the distance towards Chicago.

A/N: Just to clear it up, Vesper isn't actually the name of a true Fallen angel. It was a suggestion by Jon, well, something similar to something Jon suggested that I misinterpreted. I want to thank everybody at DLP for their comments, especially those who really seem to be thinking deeply about the story. I especially want to thank World for cracking down on all my spelling and grammar mistakes.

"So, what's the deal with the curse?" Harry asked Meciél later that night, mumbling through a mouthful of vegetables and steak. "Not that I didn't like it or anything, in fact, good on you. Here, have a steak."

"I'll pass," Meciél said in amusement from across the kitchen table. Above her hovered a ball of flames that blazed with Hellfire and the raw scent of sulphur, illuminating the entire kitchen. It didn't take much on Meciél's part to eliminate the actual scent receptors that detected sulphur and allow Harry to eat his dinner with ease.

"As for the curse, well," said Meciél, and she smiled coldly. "Vesper and I have a history. We were allies for the greater part of three centuries."

"How'd that work out for you?" Harry asked lightly.

"I discovered that she planned to betray me and struck her down when she least expected it," Meciél answered and a dark smile grew on her face. Harry blinked as her seemingly-angelic appearance flickered with an inner darkness. "I drew upon several sources of power available to me at the time and cursed the very metal that the coin had been forged with. In the end, Vesper was cursed to suffer through pain and hideousness for the rest of her time in the mortal world. Every host she takes will rot away from the inside and every time this happens, Vesper will feel an excruciating amount of pain."

"Wow," Harry uttered and stared at Meciél with a new respect. "I thought the Denarian coins were pretty much indestructible. Wasn't...um...that volcano that blew up that Roman place....wasn't that because somebody tried to destroy one of the coins?"

"Indeed," Meciél said and smiled chillingly. "It took great effort and set me back several years. But every time I visualise Vesper's rotting body, I know that it was worth it."

"You're a vindictive bitch," Harry murmured and a grin crossed his face. "Cool."

"I despise betrayal," Meciél said simply. "When I make an alliance with another, I expect them to honour their part. Those who do not will face the full fury of my wrath."

"So," Harry said after a moment's silence, staring at Meciél with a trace of mischievousness on his face. "What's my part in our alliance?"

"Excuse me?" Meciél said and true surprise flickered on her face. Harry's grin faded as she stared at him with an emotion he couldn't identify.

"You just said that you expect people to honour their parts when they make an alliance," Harry said with a careless shrug. "We have made an alliance. You've given me power, magic, skills, friendship, family even. What do you expect from me?"

"You surprise me, beloved," Meciél said after a moment's pause, her voice flat and without emotion. Her face shifted and Harry fidgeted under her gaze as she looked at him, her expression utterly inhuman.

"I didn't mean it like that," Harry protested, raising his hand and trying to placate her. "I just meant, what do you want from me? I know you want me to become powerful and all that crap, but there's got to be something else."

Meciél stared at him with hollow silver eyes and for a moment Harry feared he had offended her. His irritation and anger grew and just when he was about to snap at her, Meciél's face softened.

"For now, your first priority should be your education," Meciél said quietly. "Learn all that you can from me. Learn how to wield powerful magic. Learn how to wield your new sword. I am patient, beloved. I

will wait for you to grow your skills, just as I have waited for all my hosts.”

“And then what?” Harry pressed on, genuinely curious. “After I’ve got the power and skills that you need, then what do you want me to do?”

“I have a number of goals,” Meciél said evasively. She gave Harry a proud smile, her silver eyes flickering with affection. “You have already completed a number of them, for example, the death of Nicodemus.”

“You want me to take care of the Order of the Blackened Denarius,” Harry deduced without any hint of surprise in his voice. He raised his eyebrows. “Why am I not surprised?”

“One thing at a time, beloved,” Meciél purred softly. “One thing at a time...”

Suddenly a flash of light and a low rumbling noise interrupted Harry’s conversation. He frowned and his head shot around as another low rumble filled the room. The plate and glass on his table rattled together and a high-pitched scream of pain echoed in his apartment.

“What the fuck?” Harry snarled and jumped up onto his feet. Adrenaline and Hellfire surged through his veins as he burst into the living room, his eyes glinting with anger as he took in the walls surrounding him.

Over the years, sometimes as part of Meciél’s training regime and sometimes for his own sense of safety, Harry had carved dozens, if not hundreds, of runes into the walls of his apartment. Through these wards, Harry, mostly through Meciél, had created several different wards to obscure, hide and, if it called for, defend his home from attack. As Harry looked around, he could see every single one of these runs glowing with the Hellfire Harry had embedded into them as a hostile party repeatedly attempted to bring them down.

“Shit!” Harry cursed loudly and glared at his front door. Although there were wards that would protect the actual door from physical and magical attack, Harry didn’t expect them to last long.

'Who is it?' Meciél demanded, her voice brewing with a mixture of fury and puzzlement. 'Who is attacking us?'

"Oh, I'll give you two clues," Harry snarled as he strode across the room, approaching one of the walls. "We met her tonight and she's an anorexic whore!"

'She may have followed us from the club,' Meciél hissed and Harry felt a great surge of hatred rise up from her. Rather than blocking it off, he embraced it and allowed Hellfire to infuse his very body.

"Impossible," He growled as he reached the wall. "I apparate three times and took a portkey back here!"

'Yet we are under attack!' Meciél growled back furiously. 'Use the Eye! See who is attacking us!'

Harry's vision narrowed down on one particular rune, a small half-circle glowing with a light subtly different than the others. He pressed his thumb down on it and braced himself. Unseen to the attackers, what seemed like a vague scratching on the wall suddenly glowed with the same green light.

Something in his vision flashed and suddenly, Harry had a third eyeball. To a normal human, the extra sensory input would be extremely confusing and disorientating. Luckily for Harry, Meciél was able to process the extra data with ease and interpret it.

Dusty hallway...paint peeling from the walls...creaky floor...a flash of movement...beautiful man with blonde hair ...pale skin morphed into oily leather...eyes absent of all conscious thought...without making a noise, the creature lurched forward....struck an invisible wall...a flash of light, similar to lightning...a low rumble, akin to thunder....crispy, smoking corpse falls backwards....another man stepped forward...

Harry yanked his thumb away from the rune and shook his head dazedly, blinking rapidly. The images flashed through his mind once more and he gave a small groan as he recognised the creature.

“Great, just great,” He muttered sourly. “They’re Red Court vampires! Twenty bucks says that they’re pissed over that job I took.”

‘There was a vampire in the club today,’ Meciél reminded quickly. ‘Nonetheless, we need to leave.’

“Agreed,” Harry muttered grimly. He quickly strode into his bedroom and, with a wave of his wand, started packing the essentials.

Books flew into a small battered suitcase, somehow fitting into the small physical space with ease. The sack of gold that Dumbledore had left him flew from one of his drawers, as well as a few other small knick-knacks. Harry closed his suitcase with a small flick of his wand and glanced around the room regretfully.

“Can’t we...” He began.

‘We should leave now,’ Meciél said firmly. ‘Silk sheets and fur rugs can be replaced. Our lives cannot.’

Harry exhaled loudly but flicked his wand. The suitcase soared from the bed, flipped around a few times and shrunk down to the size of a wallet. Harry tucked it into his back pocket and aimed his wand at his velvet curtains.

“Evertoxuro!” Harry barked. Hellfire flashed through his wand and enhanced the jet of flames that sprayed from the tip. The curtains shimmered as Harry’s weak standard flame-repelling charms broke apart against the surge of dark magic.

Harry dropped his wand and watched with regret as his curtains went up in flames. Knowing that the room would shortly be consumed, he whirled around and left the room for the last time. He strode into the living room and glanced around, his eyes assessing anything and everything that could be traced to him, magically or physically. His wand swished through the air and suddenly the dirty plates and glasses exploded, removing any trace of saliva. The next spell saw his summoning circle, where he had spent hours pouring his magic in various true-magic rituals and summons, cracked and broken.

After a few minutes of distant rumbles and flares of light as vampires hurled themselves against the deadly wards, Harry had almost finished cleaning up after himself. Suddenly, a loud screeching noise filled the air and Harry winced, clasp ing his hand over his ears. His head shot to his wall and saw that over half of the runes had stopped glowing and the other half had weakened. A moment later, something slammed against his door.

“Okay, time to leave,” Harry muttered and took a deep breath. With his wand in one hand and the cane in the other, he twirled on his feet and disappeared from the room.

Or he would have had he not brushed against a foreign ward. Suddenly his body was full of hostile energy and pain wracked through his mind. He abruptly slammed back into the real world and fell to the living room floor, twitching painfully with a grimace.

“Ouch,” He groaned and attempted to stand, a soft groan escaping his throat. “I don’t want to guess or anything, but I think they might, and I say might, have a ward up.”

‘Very observant,’ Meci el said dryly. Harry could feel her mind quickly running through his options, moving at a speed far greater than Harry could comprehend. ‘The attackers have prepared themselves well. This is a specific anti-apparition ward. That is a wand-wizard ward, beloved.’

“Dumbledore!” Harry snarled softly and hatred flared in his mind. He gripped his wand tightly in his hand and his eyes glittered with fury. “That backstabbing old bastard!”

‘I doubt that Dumbledore would ever make an alliance with the vampires,’ Meci el said shrewdly. ‘Nonetheless, it doesn’t matter at the moment. Our primary concern must be to escape. Try making a portkey, but I have no doubt that it will fail. You will probably need to fight your way out of this.’

Harry took a deep breath and tried to make a portkey. The clean mug he had chosen didn’t glow in the customary blue light of a newly

made portkey and the spell failed to take hold. Growling in irritation, Harry flung the fork to the side and glared at his door. The sturdy wood was shuddering under the force of the blows but the final wards that held them together were holding, for the moment.

"I say we activate the 'Get-The-Fuck-Out' trap," Harry said grimly.

'I presume you are talking about the Fire Alarm,' Meciél said with a sigh. 'Be warned, beloved. That will siphon any remaining power from our wards. We may kill the vampires in the hallway but there could be other's away. If we wait until the wards are almost depleted, we might be able to lure the enemy in.'

"Whoever put that ward up without me detecting it is powerful," Harry disagreed. He gestured to one of the inactive runes on his wall. "If they're any good, this won't really hurt them much. I say we do it now and run while we can."

'My, you do have some brains in here,' Meciél murmured, sounding impressed. 'Very well. Activate the Fire Alarm.'

Harry allowed a cold smirk to cross his face as he pressed his thumb to the rune. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and grasped Hellfire. Liquid power roared into him in a cascading wave of searing heat. Harry embraced it and took in more and more until it felt as if he was going to explode. He was full of fire; he was full of surging darkness. Within his mind, Meciél took over and grasped the Hellfire. With a delicacy that Harry could only envy, Meciél fed the Hellfire into the rune at a steady, constant rate and it glowed with a scarlet, hellish light.

In the hallway, two dozen or so vampires milled in front of Harry's door, their eyes blank as they slammed against his apartment. They failed to notice that there were more sprinklers nestled on the roof than normal and that small runes started to flicker. After a few moment's, the sprinkler's let out a hissing noise and started to spray the vampires. Instead of water, however, droplets of glowing, scarlet of fire drizzled over the crowd. Flesh sizzled as fire scorched through skin and clothing yet the vampires remained motionless. A moment later, the drizzle turned into a fully-blown shower and the hallway was

full of blazing, blinding flames. Some of the vampires shrieked in agony as they were engulfed by fire and some remained silent, but all were vaporised in no more than a minute. The fire continued to rain from the roof for a few more moments before the sprinklers themselves were consumed and the spell broken, the fire disappearing.

Inside the apartment, Harry felt Meciél gently withdraw the enormous amount of Hellfire roaring through his body and return control back to him. A wave of fatigue slammed against his mind and Harry winced, rubbing his head and staggering up from his crouched position. Despite the strain of that spell, his eyes were alert and wary as he glanced at the suddenly motionless door and listened to the silent hallway.

"I think they couldn't handle the...heat," Harry said with an impish grin and flashed a smile when Meciél groaned.

'Beloved...'

"It looks like fire sprinklers really do save lives. Mine, that is," Harry continued, standing up and gripping his wand and cane. He took a few, cautious steps to the door and frowned, listening carefully. There was nothing.

'Take care, beloved, that you never lose your mind in the...heat...of the moment,' Meciél said after a moments pause.

"Oh snap," Harry uttered quickly, blinking surprise. "I didn't know you were that corny, Meciél."

'You've rubbed off on me,' Meciél remarked dryly. 'Can we leave now?'

Harry nodded and raised his wand. Although he uttered no words, a blast of pure kinetic force exploded forward and slammed into the door. The wards, recognising Harry's magic, failed to stop the spell and the door exploded off its hinges and out into the hallway.

Harry was quick to move, striding forward and levelling his wand down one end of the hallway, his head swivelling around to peer down the other. The walls were gritty with black scorches and the hallway was hazy with smoke. A strong scene of sulphur filled the air and small fires flickered in the darkened hallway, providing a dim, ominous light. Harry suddenly got a strange, foreboding feeling deep in his gut and when he turned his head back to look down the other end, there was somebody standing there.

Clad in dark robes, a pale-skinned, slit-nosed man stood there, staring at Harry with gleaming crimson eyes. With a yew wand clasped in his hand and looking utterly confident in his own power, Lord Voldemort gave Harry a chilling smile and raised his wand, his serpentine voice hissing out two words with great hatred and malice.

‘Avada Kedavra!’

Harry’s reflexes were impressive on their own. With Meciél enhancing the neural activity within his brains, he could flick his wand faster than the human eye could properly see.

Voldemort was faster.

Power reverberated through the hallway as a sickly streak of green light blasted forward. A howl of a roaring wind shrieked through the hallway as Harry, dark power glinting in his eye, responded a millisecond later. A crackling bolt of sapphire energy blasted forward with a noise reminiscent of a thunderclap. Before either wizard knew what was happening, the two curses had slammed into each other and suddenly there was a loud crack of power and Harry’s wand was vibrating as though an electric charge was surging through it.

‘Prior Incantatem!’ Meciél hissed. ‘Hold it as long as you can! We cannot let Voldemort gain a magical advantage over us!’

A narrow beam of golden light was connecting the tips of the two wands from the giant sparkling orb of clashing magic in the middle. Giant lightning-like jolts sparked off the orb, destructive magic tearing through the walls. Bricks shattered and dust flittered from the roof as the hallway became filled with a blinding light. Golden fire flickered

into existence and raged in tandem with a haunting, melodious song that broke into existence. The very notes of the music sent lances of unease, and perhaps even fear, down Harry's back but he ignored it as he tightened his grip, panting in the effort of pushing forward.

Voldemort was glaring at him, his eyes aflame with hatred and bewilderment. Harry stared back with furious emerald eyes until he had to look away as the light became even more blinding as more and more golden fire roared into existence. The floor was creaking madly, the walls shuddering and the roof being torn to pieces.

In the middle of the hallway, the orb of golden power had paused between them and was glowing like a miniature sun, straining as both wizards poured their will and power into it. Voldemort had the edge on power, dark, misty shadows warping over his thin, sickly form. His dark robes flapped around him madly and his serpentine-like slits flared with anger. On the other side, Harry had the advantage of Meciél's will, which, merely by itself was enormous. Slowly, Harry poured Hellfire, determination and Meciél's ancient fury into the golden orb and watched with grim satisfaction as another lightning-like bolt zapped from the orb, scorching past Voldemort's head as the orb slowly moved towards the Dark Lord.

Fire jutted out from the orb, spreading across the hallway like a wave of golden air mist. The walls shuddered, dust and mortar creaking from the loose bricks and a section of the roof groaned as it crumbled downwards and was consumed by golden fire. Voldemort was frowning, the wand vibrating madly in his hands, and his crimson eyes were wide with astonishment. Hatred radiated off his very being but Harry could feel the stirring of fear and took satisfaction from it.

"Take that, fuck-face!" Harry snarled and took a strained step forward, thrusting his wand closer to the golden orb.

The orb shuddered and Harry could smell sulphur as it was pushed towards Voldemort with a rush of golden flames. There was a loud blasting souse as red and gold lightning branched out of the beam of light. Harry's hair was tingling and he gritted his teeth as Voldemort responded with a blast of awesome power.

Suddenly Voldemort smiled, baring his sharp, pointed teeth and with an intense look of concentration on his face, removed his hands from his wand. Harry blinked in astonishment as the wand hovered in place, the golden light still pouring from the tip and connecting to the orb. Almost instantly, the resistance Harry was encountering lessened but did not disappear- Voldemort was somehow maintaining his connection with his wand.

“What the hell!” Harry snarled, his eyes widening as fear stirred in his heart. Hellfire poured through his veins and he could hear the furious beating of his heart as he began to force the orb closer and closer to Voldemort’s wand.

But the Dark Lord merely smiled and clasped his hand. His crimson eyes closed in concentration and, with a loud bestial roar, his hands flew out with great force and slammed into the two walls on either side of him. Harry felt a blast of power and stared with wide eyes as the walls shuddered with an unknown spell. Suddenly they were crumbling and falling apart, a large crack shooting down the hallway, smaller cracks branching off it as bricks fell to the ground.

Harry’s eyes widened and he only had seconds to move as he, with all of his strength, yanked his wand out of the connection. It was only because Voldemort had a limited control over his wand that Harry was able to break the connection, but break it he did and for a single instant, golden fire raged uncontrollably. Meciél whispered instructions into Harry’s unconscious mind that he automatically followed and he flicked his wand, forcing all of his concentration and power into a shield that encompassed the entire hall.

Sparkling blue and green hues formed a transparent, air-tight barrier in front of him as Harry, frowning in concentration, summoned the golden flames towards him. In a furious gale, the fire flew towards him and battered against his shield, squeezing around it, filling in every single crevice and forming a second layer. An instant later, Harry weakened the grip of the shield and suddenly he was blown off his feet as he was struck by the pressure of the fire, landing ten metres backwards and wincing as a few loose flashes of flame struck his exposed skin.

In the two seconds this had taken, Voldemort's spell was tearing through the walls. Bricks crumbled and mortar created a dusty haze through the air. The spell reached the walls around Harry and burst out just as Harry was launched from his feet. Two blinding bolts of azure magic burst from the walls and collided with each other just where Harry had been standing a minute ago. There was a flash of light and a burst of sonic energy as a dull, thumping detonation tore through the roof, walls and floor. A terrible groaning noise filled the hallway as the roof collapsed a second later, filling the corridor with dust, dirt and debris.

Suddenly silence reigned where deafening noise had once been. Harry coughed from his position on the floor and staggered up, his eyes blinking as the last vestiges of golden fire faded away. His ears were ringing and Hellfire was pumping into his body at great rates, almost begging to be let out.

"Fucking hell," He gasped, absently dusting himself off. Smoke had filled the air and the stench of both sulphur and dust had filled his nose. "I guess it wasn't Dumbledore."

'The wards are still up!' Meciél hissed urgently. 'Quickly, take the fire escape stairway and flee before he breaks through!'

Just as she finished speaking, the debris let out a low groaning noise and shuddered. Harry's eyes widened as he sensed the formation of a blast of power and his wand whipped up just in time. The debris suddenly exploded outwards, eerie cobalt light glowing from the cracks and crevices of the flaming pile, and shot towards him in a shower of shrapnel and light.

A red flash spilled from the runes on his wand as Harry barked "caveo!" and fell into a duelling stance, shifting his shoulder forward. A hazy ripple of sea-green light spilled from the tip of his wand and provided a small glow of light. As the debris tumbled down the hallway towards him, it struck the glowing light and suddenly swerved to avoid him. Wooden planks, broken bricks flew past him. Harry grimaced as one large wooden shard spiralled past him, the sharp edge of the wood slashing at his shoulder.

As the last of the debris rocketed past him, Harry saw Voldemort stalking forward, his eyes filled with malice. He strode towards a gaping hole on the ground and apparently walked on nothing but air to cross it.

“Exturbo Arduro!” Harry growled, thrusting his wand forward. Hellfire spilled out in the form of a scorching blast of flames.

Voldemort didn’t even slow down but raised a pale hand, caught the blast of fire and threw it straight back at him. Harry’s eyes widened at the manoeuvre but didn’t halt in his attack, a powerful devastation curse blasting forward and ripping up floorboards. Voldemort brought his wand up and, with an ease that Harry could only envy, parried the spell to the side. It exploded in a roaring flash of light and suddenly half of the wall was crumbling down.

At the same time, Harry’s own blast of fire struck him. Instead of being burnt, the fire broke apart, looped around his body and shot to the side, right into one of the walls. Bricks shattered and fell to the ground as the fire bore into the wall.

“Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort said menacingly.

A streak of deadly green light glided forward at Harry, who, in a single movement, unsheathed the sword from the cane and brought it forward. The sword flared in a burst of holy flames and the jet of dark magic suddenly swerved to the side, as if the sword and the curse were magnetically repulsed.

“Crucio!” Voldemort snapped, his wand blurring through the air. A crack of scarlet light flashed from his wand. “Crucio!”

Both blasts of dark magic shattered apart as they struck the seemingly solid bar of silver flames now in Harry’s hand. Voldemort seemed to hesitate then, obviously remembered the last time he had gotten too close to that particular sword.

“Laedo fervefacio!” Harry barked, brandishing his wand like a whip. Light spilled from the runes of his wand as a trail of blazing fire, reeking with sulphur, snapped forward.

The end of the fiery whip gouged through the walls in the cramped hallway and lashed out at Voldemort. The Dark Lord did not look amused and his hand lashed out, gripping the end of the fiery whip and narrowing his eyes in concentration. Suddenly Harry gasped and had to grip his wand tightly as Voldemort tore the spell away from him. Fire blossomed as Voldemort gathered it into his hands. The ball of flames shimmered and grew into a fiery beast in the visage of a leering serpent that Voldemort threw at Harry.

Harry held the sword up like a torch and winced as a burst of holy flames rushed through him. His glove protected his hand from the harmful effects of the blazing sword. The fiery serpent soared and struck the blade, dissolving in a puff of dark, dirty smoke. Voldemort's next spell gouged a large crack in the almost-decimated walls as Harry parried it backwards, halting the beginnings of a golden mist. An instant later, the hall shuddered and every single piece of debris shot at Harry.

Harry took in Voldemort's leering, lipless grin and flaring crimson eyes. Meciél was whispering something into his ear but he ignored it as a strange sensation flooded his body. Without even realising what he was doing, he stepped to the right and spun his body to avoid a piece of broken wood. He ducked; narrowly avoiding a pile of bricks, then jumped up and absently batted a mangled piece of debris from taking his head off his shoulders. For the next few seconds, Harry managed to weave, duck and dodge out of the way of a hundred different flying pieces of debris. His body felt light and his feet were tingling as he suddenly stopped, swinging around to face Voldemort as the last of the debris zoomed past him.

Voldemort was watching with something like shock flittering on his face. The feelings of lightness abruptly vanished and Hellfire roared in to take its place, shaking Harry out of his stupor. The sword, which had been blazing in a blinding beam of silver flames, died down to a small flicker.

'The luck of God,' Meciél murmured, sounding both intrigued and disgusted. 'It appears you really are a Knight.'

Voldemort suddenly took a step backwards, keeping a wary eye on Harry's sword, and swished his wand. Three pieces of debris suddenly hovered from the ground and became swords of darkened steel. With a sadistic grin, Voldemort motioned with his wand and they shot towards Harry with the speed of a bullet. Harry barely had time to bring his sword up as he blocked it and, Hellfire distorting his normal human form, extended two bony, ashen wings and blocked the other two. He took a step backwards as he parried the next three blows and with a roar of defiance, slammed his foot on the ground, preparing his escape.

Voldemort swayed on his feet, his eyes widening with surprise as a wall of fire burst from the ground before him. He swished his wand to remove it just as the fire hissed and clouds of boiling steam shot forward. With a hiss of anger, Voldemort banished both fire and steam and prepared to cast another curse- only to find that Potter had fled, the flaps of his coat disappearing in one of the many holes littering the walls. Voldemort took a step forward just as the sound of breaking glass hit his ears and a moment later, he recognised the loud crack of apparition.

Fury boiled in his veins and Voldemort's eyes flashed as he stood in the battle-scorched hallway, his wand clenched tightly in his hands. His cloak flapped around him as his anger took physical form and he barely heard the soft footsteps that came up behind a few moments later. But heard them he had and he spun around, gathering his formidable powers and preparing to annihilate whoever stood there.

"Well," Vesper said crisply, her eyes taking in the ruined corridor. She was able to hide her feelings well but Voldemort knew how to read the human body, no matter who was inhabiting it, and he detected a small flash of fear. "I see I've come too late. You should have waited! Instead, you've failed us both!"

"How dare you...." Voldemort hissed dangerously as Vesper strode towards him, walking at the very edges of the gaping hole in the ground and avoiding the sizzling walls, still heated from the amount of fire that had been produced.

"I gave you everything you needed to destroy them," Vesper snapped, her blue eyes flickering with an odd yellow light. "Where are the vampires that accompanied you? My alliance with the Red Court is tenuous at best and I do not want to have to explain why they're soldiers are dead."

"They were...dissatisfied with my strategy," Voldemort said and gave Vesper a lipless smile, a pang of amusement filtering through him. "So I had to use other means to convince them. Sadly, this strategy saw them perish...for a noble cause, of course."

"You utter fool," Vesper snarled and Voldemort's eyes flashed with anger. Anger raged within him and he used it to make him strong, flexing his hands and seriously contemplating the death of the being in front of him.

"You are the fool," He said menacingly. "You had him in your grasp and you let him slip by! You should have killed him when you had the chance!"

"It was at a location whose neutrality is protected by the accords!" Vesper snarled and her skin flushed with unhealthy colour, thick, dark veins surfacing from her once unblemished skin.

"Neutrality be damned!" Voldemort hissed furiously, absently twirling his wand in his hand.

"I agree," Vesper said coldly, her eyes now completely yellow.

They stared at him with an utterly inhuman look, her vast, ancient years reflected in her cruel, yellow eyes.

Voldemort was not impressed.

"But if I want to build my empire, then I will need allies...to begin with, at least. I may not respect the accords...but they do! I can't afford to alienate them!" Vesper finished tightly.

"So far, you have not proven yourself to be worthy of my ally," Voldemort said coldly and his eyes raked over Vesper's form with

derision. "Perhaps the time will come where I will need to dispose of you."

"You may try," Vesper said coldly, brushing away Voldemort's threat as she would a fly. "I suggest that it wait until Potter and Meciell have both been disposed off. Then, Lord Voldemort, we shall see just who will dispose of whom."

Voldemort straightened and, giving Vesper one last sneer, he twirled on his feet and let his dark power remove him from the hallway, disappearing silently as he disappeared.

A/N: A big thanks to World, Warlocke and Eaglette from DLP in their grammar and spelling checks. Also thanks to the other dozen or so people who gave me useful feedback. This chapter, in my opinion, feels a bit forced, which is why it's taken a while to come out. It still feels that way, but eh, what can you do? The next chapter won't be out until Friday minimum, probably longer. I have an exam on Thursday that I've barely studied for, so cram, cram, cram. Anyway, I hope you enjoy

"Do we have to?" Harry whined, suppressing a grimace as he pressed his hand against the bloodied wound on his shoulder. He had apparated to the first place Meciél had suggested to him and now he was really regretting it as he ducked behind a gleaming red car, avoiding the light from the streetlamps and the bright, full moon that hung above.

Now that Meciél wasn't focussed on helping Harry escape the battle with Voldemort, she was able to begin the process of healing his body. Within a few moments, Harry could feel the blood slowly halting as Meciél's power washed over his body and began to knit his flesh back together.

'Technically speaking, they are your brethren,' Meciél reminded.

"Our brethren," Harry said and suppressed a smile as Meciél gave a resounding mental flinch. "Hey, we're in this together. When I'm cursed, you're cursed. When I'm hurt, you're hurt. When I'm getting laid, you're getting laid.

'So that's why I'm still a virgin' Meciél retorted amusedly and Harry slapped a hand to his chest in a mocking gesture of hurt.

"I distinctly remember a rather wonderful, sweaty night with none other than Maeve," Harry said and grinned mischievously. "I don't like to mention it at all because you always get so...touchy...about it."

'Technically, beloved, that was bestiality,' Meciél said smugly.

"If you're that concerned over your virginity then maybe I could...you know...do you," Harry said and raised his eyebrows cheekily, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "That's not bestiality, is it?"

‘Technically, beloved, that would make you delusional,’ Meciél said after a moment’s pause and Harry felt her mischievousness flare up in his mind. ‘Firstly, because I am nothing but an illusion to your mind and secondly, because it won’t happen anytime soon...unless, of course, you beg me..’

“Freud would have had a ball if he had ever got his hands on me,” Harry muttered, mostly to himself. “Oedipus Complex, eat your heart out.”

‘Believe me, you are inflicted with worse psychological problems than your perverse sexual desires,’ Meciél responded wryly. ‘But I think that we’ve gotten off topic a little here.’

“Low blow, Meciél,” Harry muttered, but he wore an amused smile. His eyes absently flickered over the brightly lit suburban street that he was standing, drawn to one particular house with a white picket fence. “In fact, I guess you could say that it was...below...the belt, if you get what I’m saying.”

‘Perhaps we should focus on more relevant matters now,’ Meciél said firmly. ‘I thought you would be a little more concerned about the Dark Lord who almost killed you a few minutes ago.’

“Hey, we’re still alive,” Harry protested loudly, and winced when a dog started barking loudly. He pressed himself against the car and waited until the dog fell silent, scowling in irritation. “Fucking mutt.”

‘We are alive, beloved, because we ran,’ Meciél said crisply.

“What, you want to go back?” Harry asked in disbelief. He started to rise up from the ground, his wand gripped in his left hand and the sheathed sword clasped in his right. “You were the one who told me to run, but hey, if you want me to go back and kick his arse...”

‘You would lose,’ Meciél said bluntly and Harry paused. ‘Not only does he know spells that I, frankly, have never heard of, but he has powers that rival your own and a flair for duelling that surpass any of our foes.’

“So?” Harry snorted. He raised his cane, knowing that the water-patterned blade was flaring with silver light within the wooden sheath. “I’ll jab him with this. He doesn’t seem to like it when I do that.”

‘Luck will only go so far, no matter who is giving it to you,’ Meciél said darkly and Harry blinked at the truth in her words. He heaved a sigh and sat back down again.

“I really wasn’t expecting him to pop up,” He said and grimaced as he recalled his apartment going up in flames. “That’s going to be expensive to replace as well.”

‘I do not think that it was no coincidence that Voldemort attacked us mere hours after we encountered Vesper,’ Meciél said grimly. ‘It seems that they have a close alliance. We could be in some trouble here, beloved.’

“Ah, I don’t know,” Harry grunted as he stood up. A wave of weariness struck him but Meciél automatically pushed it away as Harry started striding towards the house with the white-picket fence. “People like Voldemort and Vesper generally don’t like others having as much power as they do. They’ll be throwing hissy fits at each other in no time.”

‘You could be right,’ Meciél mused as Harry opened the gate with a creak. ‘Vesper has always desired to be the most powerful of us all and from what I have observed of Voldemort, he is not much better. Still, we will need refuge for the time being.’

Harry walked forward and shivered as he crossed some kind of invisible boundary. It felt more spiritual than magical and for a second Harry heard blaring trumpets in his ears. His skin was tingling and his hair stood up on its end as Meciél recoiled from the wards, her darkness sizzling in pain. A moment later, the wards fell silent and apparently allowed Harry and Meciél to move forward.

“I know we need refuge,” Harry muttered as he walked up the path towards the brightly lit porch and stomped loudly up the steps. He

reached the door and raised his hand to rap his knuckles against the wood when he paused. "We're not going to be here for long, are we?"

'Until we can find better accommodation,' Meciell said. 'Believe me, beloved, I do not wish to be here anymore than you do, but I do not believe that Vesper and Voldemort will try to attack two Knight's of the Cross in a warded house.'

The door opened before Harry could knock and Michael Carpenter appeared. He blinked at Harry's slightly bloodied and singed clothes and waited for Harry to speak with an expression of eternal patience on his face.

"Can I crash here for a while?" Harry asked carefully, keeping his face blank and his voice neutral. Insults could come when he had secured himself the couch.

"Come in," Michael offered after a moment's pause and opened the door. Harry took a deep breath and, for the second time in his life- the first time he did so voluntarily- he stepped into the brightly lit Carpenter house

Harry walked into the Carpenter living room and took in the large TV, the comfortable leather couches and the dozens of photographs of smiling blonde, children on the mantelpiece. A grimace crossed his face as he remembered the last time he had been here. His mind raced with images of the fight with the Knights, the flash of silver light and the incredible deep-rooted pain that had spread through his body as the holy light had driven him to a level of pain he could only compare to the Cruciatus Curse.

"I still don't know why you saved my life all those years ago," Harry said bluntly, taking in the soft glow of the house. The love that the family held for each other seemed to have leaked into the walls, creating an atmosphere of kindness and gentleness. "I wouldn't have done the same."

"That's why we're two very different people," Michael said calmly. Harry noted that his hair held a few more streaks of grey now than it had a few months ago and suppressed a smile. "What's the trouble, Harry? I didn't think I'd see you come here again, not after last time."

"Don't tell me Charity is still pissed off that I stole her car," Harry said and folded his arms. "She deserved it anyway, the stupid devil-woman."

"I think she was more upset by the fact that you held a knife to Amanda's throat," Michael said, the barest hint of steel lacing his voice. "I wasn't too happy to hear it myself."

"Yet at Hogwarts Amanda was always the first to start bugging me about something or other," Harry said, rolling his eyes in irritation. "You have no idea how close I came to turning her into a goat or something."

"You can turn people into goats?" Michael asked in surprise.

"Well, no," Harry admitted and paused. "That's probably why I didn't, now that I think about it."

"What happened, Harry?" Michael asked, drawing the attention back onto the matter at hand. His eyes assessed Harry with growing concern as he took in the full state of the boy. "You look like you've been in a fight."

"No, no, no," Harry said, shaking his head quickly. "A fight is when I stand at one end and the other person stands at the other and we start trying to kill each other. When I'm sitting down and trying to have some dinner and a bunch of vampires try to tear down my wards and a Dark Lord starts throwing magic at me- that, Michael, is called an ambush."

"Dark Lord?" Michael asked quickly, leaning forward and staring at Harry intently.

"Voldemort," Harry said and flashed a sarcastic grin. "Apparently he's working with Vesper now. Isn't the world fun?"

"Vesper and Voldemort," Michael said and took a deep breath. "That's a disturbing match."

"I'm a little more worried about Voldemort," Harry said grimly. He held up the wooden cane for Michael to see and continued. "This little thing was a help, but not enough. He's good, Knight, far better than you and a little better than me."

"He's still powerful," Michael mused carefully. "I assumed that the wound you gave him at the graveyard would kill him, or at least keep him down for a while."

"Maybe not as powerful as he was during the whole stint we did in the graveyard," Harry said slowly, absently running a finger over the disfiguring scar slashed across his face. "But still powerful enough to destroy my home, my belongings, everything I own- you know, small, unimportant stuff like that."

"I'm glad that you see the truth worth of material objects," Michael said and Harry snorted.

"Yeah, says the guy with the fifty-inch TV," He muttered under his breath.

"I assume that you're seeking refuge by coming here?" Michael said. Harry opened his mouth to answer when a loud boisterous laughter burst out from the closed door on the other side of the living room, accompanied by high-pitched giggling.

"Um...bad time?" Harry asked slowly. "Because that giggling sounded like something I heard on the street corner the other night. I'm not judging you or anything, but I thought you were Christian and full of virtues and all that crap."

"That giggling was probably from my eleven year old daughter," Michael said sternly. He paused and cocked his head as he thought something through. "You must be tired and hungry. Would you like something to eat?"

"Now that you mention it, I never did get to finish my dinner," Harry mused, absently rubbing his stomach. "You know, rampaging Dark Lord's blowing up my apartment and all."

"There's enough for one more," Michael offered and Harry paused.

"Eh, what the hell?" He said and followed Michael into the kitchen.

Sitting at the long table in the middle of the room was an assortment of blonde's and brunette's, who all turned to the door and were eying him with various reactions. There was a girl, maybe eighteen or nineteen with long, braided dark hair and a serious demeanour, and a boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen with dark hair and blue eyes, who stared at him with puzzled politeness. The youngest boy, ten or so, was staring at him with narrowed eyes, as if he could recall Harry's face from somewhere. However, an eleven year old girl with short blonde hair and a tall, lanky man with broad shoulders and grey eyes stared at him with dawning comprehension and shock as they instantly recognised his face.

"You again!" The young man snarled, jumping up from the table. His chair fell over with a loud bang, eliciting a small cry of surprise from the youngest girl but he ignored it as he gripped a gleaming steak knife in his hand, as if it would protect him from Harry. "What are you doing here?"

'Can I curse him?' Harry mentally asked with a hopeful tone in his voice.

'No,' Meciél responded severely.

'Damn.'

"Daniel," Michael interjected sternly and Daniel quailed under his father's stern glare. "Put the knife down."

"But Dad..." Daniel protested loudly but Michael didn't budge and the young man sighed as he lowered the knife.

"What's going on?" The eldest girl asked, her voice jumping with strain and her blue eyes piercing Harry with confused eyes. "Daniel, what are you doing?"

“Remember that kid I told you about, Alicia?” Daniel said, breathing quickly as he glared at Harry, and he jerked his thumb towards the subject in question. “That’s him. That’s ‘Harry’.”

Alicia gasped, placing a hand over her mouth and swivelling her head to stare at Harry in surprise. The Denarian could see a mixture of curiosity and wariness on her face.

“I’m Harry,” The ten year old boy protested, staring at Daniel with baleful blue eyes. Suddenly his eyes widened with recognition and he whirled his head to regard Harry with a shocked look. “Wait, I remember you! You saved our lives! You...killed those evil people!”

“That was you?” the seventeen year old boy burst out in astonishment and frowned as he studied Harry, absently brushing his dark hair out of his crystal-clear blue eyes. “Yeah, I remember you now. You came here and warned us...”

“I suppose I did,” Harry said and crossed his arms across his chest, his piercing gaze meeting Daniel’s. The young man faltered and slowly sat down. Harry lip’s twitched with a sardonic smile. “So, does saving all of your lives earn me a plate of food, hmm?”

“Who wants seconds?” A loud, cheerful voice called from the other side of the kitchen. Charity Carpenter came into view, her long blonde hair emphasizing her beautiful figure. She was holding a small steaming saucepan and wearing both an apron and a wide smile.

“Charity,” Harry greeted coolly but suppressed a wince as Meciél gave him a warning prod within his mind. He stood there, his arms folded and his eyebrows raised as Charity’s smile faded and she stared at Harry with a neutral expression on her face. “Still torturing children with Iodine and recitations of the bible?”

‘Torture?’ interjected Meciél, a faint hint of surprise in her voice. ‘Did I miss something when we were separated all those years ago?’

‘You live in my mind,’ Harry said with a snort. ‘Have a look for yourself. I swear to you though, this woman is more evil than you are.’

'Doubtful.'

"I would hardly call it torture," Charity said evenly and placed the saucepan in the middle of the table. Her eyes flickered from Harry to Michael and then back again.

"Iodine stings," Harry said in clipped tones. "And the bible- well, that was just cruel. You didn't even read the best parts. There's this little section early off in the bible that tells you all the gross and cool sexual things you shouldn't do. I know this only because I'm using that as a checklist- I'm down to bestiality."

"I see," Charity said icily.

"Meciel thinks I should cross that one off because I did Maeve, and technically she's not human," Harry continued, enjoying Charity's growing disgust. "But personally, it's not bestiality unless it's with a goat. Say," he said slowly, a wicked idea coming to mind, and he turned back to Michael. "About that, where's Amanda? I only ask because I want to practise my transfiguration on her..."

"There are children here," Charity snapped coldly and Harry raised an eyebrow, looking decidedly unimpressed as he gazed at the gawking faces around the table.

"Yes," he drawled slowly. "Children who are alive because of me, so can I have something to eat now?"

"Michael..." Charity started but Michael turned to stare at his wife and her face softened, reluctant acceptance replacing indignant anger. She sighed and motioned for Harry to take the empty seat next to Alicia and Hope.

"Thank you," Harry said insincerely and sat down with a loud sigh, absently brushing his shoulders. He inspected his healing wound as Charity filled a bowl with some kind of stir fry and placed it in front of him.

“Are you hurt?” Came a small voice from beside him and Harry blinked, shifting his gaze to the little blonde-haired Hope sitting next to him. She was staring at him with nothing short of fascination and a distinct lack of fear and Harry groaned, shaking his head.

‘Fires of Hell,’ Meciél swore softly. ‘There are two of them. What is it with the blonde children of this family?’

“Oh, no, no, no,” Harry said quickly. “One little blonde-haired brat bugging me is enough.”

“What?” The girl uttered softly, looking hurt at Harry’s tone. “I just wanted to know if you were alright.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said curtly, rolling his eyes in irritation and turning back to his dinner. He took a cautious sniff at it, glancing at Charity shrewdly, but decided to throw caution to the wind and took a bite. After all, it wasn’t like she would poison her own children.

“Is it nice?” Hope asked again and Harry sighed, lowering his fork and turning his head to stare at the annoying brat.

“It’s absolutely horrible,” he said blandly. “It’s so horrible that I, being selfless and kind and all that crap, will take your food to spare you the suffering of tasting something this foul.”

And with that Harry reached over and took Hope’s dinner, dumping it into his own and returning the greasy, stained bowl back to her. The little girl accepted the bowl with a blank look and watched as Harry tore into both her dinner and his own.

“Um...thanks?” She offered hesitantly.

“What the hell was that?” Daniel snarled from across the table. Harry looked up with an annoyed frown on his face as the lanky young man glared at him in anger, yet Harry could detect the underlying fear that spurred Daniel’s anger on.

“That was me stealing your sister’s dinner under laughably false pretences,” Harry said and flashed an arrogant smirk. “Problem?”

'They are doing you a favour,' Meciél said, a tad reluctantly. 'Perhaps you should be a little nicer.'

'Do I have to?' Harry protested.

'At the very least, try not to kill any of them,' Meciél sighed.

"Daniel," Michael interjected sternly. "You know how I feel about that kind of language."

Daniel shifted in his seat but remained defiant as Harry lowered his gaze and dug into his dinner. He found that he was surprisingly hungry after his duel with Voldemort, having tapped deep into his power and working up quite the appetite.

Meanwhile, Michael had taken Charity by the arm and was slowly conversing with her in soft tones. Charity's face was growing darker and darker by the second as Michael continued patiently, and Harry could make out words like 'attack' and 'refuge' and 'help'.

"Why are you here?" asked the teen girl with the dark, braided hair-Alicia, if he recalled. Harry glanced up and saw that she looked genuinely curious.

"My place got blown up," Harry said carelessly around a mouthful of food. He swallowed and took a sip from one of the glasses on the table, ignoring the disapproval of the youngest boy, who stared at him unblinkingly.

"Really? Somebody blew your place up?" questioned the seventeen year old boy excitedly, leaning forward. "What happened?"

"I blew my place up," Harry corrected and let a lazy smile cross his face as the boy's eyes went wide with surprise.

"Why?" Alicia asked slowly, looking puzzled. "Why would you do that?"

“So the vampires and the Dark Lord didn’t get their hands on my stuff,” Harry answered testily and frowned. “If I can’t have it, no-one can.”

“What do you...?” Alicia started, but was interrupted.

“Dark Lord?” The younger boy asked over his sister. Alicia showed the first emotion Harry had seen other than a desire for knowledge and scowled at her brother.

“Don’t interrupt me Matthew,” she said crossly.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Matthew said carelessly, throwing his arms up. “No need to get all high-and-mighty on me.”

“You do it all the time and it’s common courtesy, not ‘high-and-mighty’,” Alicia responded through gritted teeth and Harry suddenly had the feeling that this was an old argument between the two of them.

“Alicia, Matthew,” Daniel snapped, his glare not softening as he directed it at his siblings. “Don’t do this here, not now, not in front of...him.”

“Hey, don’t mind me,” Harry broke in, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “I’m just sitting here, doing my thing. Please, have your bitch-fest. I don’t mind.”

Alicia and Matthew scowled at him in unison but Harry shrugged them off and turned back to his dinner. A few moments later, a small voice drifted from the other end of a table.

“What’s a Dark Lord?” The youngest dark-haired boy asked innocently. “Is he like a Dork Lord?”

“Dork Lord,” Hope muttered from next to him and sighed. “Harry, you are such a dweeb.”

“Hey, don’t call me dweeb, princess,” the young boy, Harry, retorted fiercely and Hope flushed, red straining her pale cheeks.

“Brats!” Harry said sharply and both Harry and Hope turned to look at him, their scowls fading away into nervousness as he directed a very pointed look. “One bitch-fest a night, okay?”

Harry and Hope nodded in unison.

“Anyway, a Dark Lord is about that high,” Harry continued brightly, pointing to a spot above his head. “He has red eyes, snake-like nose, pale skin, a flair for dark magic and a curious sexual fetish for snakes.”

“Sexual fetish?” Little Harry asked curiously, his eyes wide with innocent. “What’s that?”

Harry grinned and ignored the choking noises that Daniel, Alicia and Matthew were making as he leaned forward.

“You see, Harry,” the Denarian started with gleaming eyes. “There are some people out there who get aroused...”

“Hey!” Hope exclaimed quickly and nudged, nudged, Harry in the ribs. She shook her head frantically, her little pigtailed whipping about as she stared at him with serious blue eyes. “He’s too little to know what that means yet.”

“And you’re not?” Harry asked and snorted. “Then you know what a pee-pee does, right? Well, think of that with a snake.”

Hope blushed furiously and scrunched up her nose in disgust. Harry grinned and turned back to his dinner, ignoring Daniel’s complaints as Meciél spoke to him within his mind.

‘Your corrupting influence knows no bounds,’ she murmured in amusement. ‘Although I am curious- Where did the sexual fetish for snakes come from? I can’t remember hearing that about Lord Voldemort.’

‘I’m going to be honest with you,’ Harry said. ‘I took a stab in the dark. He looks like it though, doesn’t he?’

‘Indeed,’ Meciél murmured.

‘Ugly is stating it nicely,’ Harry snorted. ‘I have to admit, despite his looks, he really knows his magic. That trick with the hands on the wall- that was cool. So was that walking over air thing. Can you teach me that?’

‘We will work on it,’ Meciél answered evasively.

‘Is there any more food?’ Hope asked hopefully, craning her neck to peer into the now-empty saucepan. Harry took a bite of his food and suppressed a childish smile when Daniel shook his head.

Hope looked crestfallen and rubbed her stomach, staring at Harry’s bowl. She looked as if she wanted to ask him something but her nerves failed her and she sighed and glanced away. Daniel frowned and glared at Harry, who ignored the older boy and dug into his food.

‘Perhaps you should give her something to eat, seeing as you stole her dinner,’ Meciél suggested sardonically. ‘Look at that face. You must be positively flooded with guilt.’

“Want a cat?” Harry asked gruffly and Hope glanced back at him, looking puzzled.

“A cat?” She asked slowly.

“You know, four legs, fur, tail, whiskers, cat,” Harry said and placed his fork down. “You said you were hungry, so I could magic you up a cat and we could all dig in.”

“I’m not going to eat a cat!” Hope exclaimed loudly. Her brother, Harry, sniggered.

“Why not?” Harry asked in apparent surprise. “It’s good for you.”

“No it’s not!” Hope argued, folding her arms and giving Harry what she thought was a stern glare.

"The Chinese do it and look how many of them there are," Harry said airily.

"We're not eating a cat," Hope said with a tone of finality in her voice.

"Fine," Harry said easily, taking the last bite of his dinner and setting his fork to the side. "But don't say that I never try to be nice to people."

"So, what happened tonight?" Matthew asked after a moment's pause. He ignored the dirty look his older brother sent him and watched Harry intently.

"I told you..." Harry started exasperatedly, rolling his eyes in irritation, but he was cut off.

"Did you fight him?" Alicia asked curiously.

"No," Harry drawled sarcastically. "We played backgammon, sipped tea and nibbled on buttered crumpets because we're English and all-of course we had a fight."

Alicia flushed and ducked her head at Harry's derisive response.

"You lost?" Matthew questioned in surprise. He looked Harry up and down, seemingly scanning the younger Denarian for any major injuries.

"I didn't lose," Harry snapped quickly and Matthew flinched as, for an instant, Harry's eyes glinted with fiery power.

"Touchy, are we?" Daniel asked snidely.

"I didn't lose. I just decided that it might be prudent to leave Voldemort to his devices for a while," Harry said carefully and leaned forward conspiratorially, as if imparting a great secret. "He missed his afternoon nap and was all cranky."

"Voldemort?" echoed Alicia, her face scrunched up in thought. Harry could tell that she was a great lover of knowledge- probably a bookworm or something.

"Isn't he the evil wizard that came back a few months ago?" Matthew murmured hesitantly. "I could have sworn that was the name?"

"Yeah, Amanda was telling us all about him," Alicia answered. She focussed her gaze back on Harry. "They call him You-Know-Who, because he used to kill anybody who said his name."

"That's the one," Harry supplied.

"Didn't he...um...murder your...your parents?" Matthew asked, looking a touch uncomfortable.

"From what I've heard," Harry said with a shrug. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes flickering over Michael and Charity, who were still arguing in soft tones from across the room.

"You don't sound too upset," Alicia observed shrewdly.

"That's the thing about losing parents at a young age," Harry answered with a slight smile. "You never really get to know them well enough to care about them."

"Is he powerful then?" Matthew asked.

"Ah, he's got a little power behind him," Harry admitted with a frown on his face. He was feeling quite sleepy at the moment, with a good dinner after a good fight.

"Why didn't you beat him?" Hope asked curiously and stared at Harry with wide blue eyes. "Don't you have a...you know, a thing...in your head?"

"Thing?" Little Harry asked from across the table, looking perplexed.

"A bad angel," Hope answered her brother, rolling her eyes.

“Oh,” Harry said with dawning comprehension. “Like the bad people that Dad fights. You’re one of them?”

The older Harry gave the small child a withering glare and watched with amusement as the younger Harry flushed and ducked his gaze.

“Is he stronger than you?” Matthew asked curiously.

“I thought you were a knight,” Alicia said at the same time, staring at Harry with confusion.

“Whoa,” Harry whistled slowly, staring the Carpenter children with mild annoyance. “This isn’t Oprah. I don’t have to tell you my life story and if you told me you had cancer- well, I’d laugh. But for the record, Voldemort isn’t more powerful than me.”

‘Keep telling yourself that,’ Meciél sniffed.

‘Not helpful, Meciél.’

“Then why did you lose?” Daniel asked, looking quite smug. Harry’s dislike for the boy surged and he restrained his anger as he turned his head towards the young man.

“Okay,” Harry said firmly and slapped his hand down on the table. The younger Harry flinched at the noise and the table fell silent. Harry saw Michael and Charity briefly look up, before Michael led his wife into the room next door.

“We are going to stop talking about me right now.” Harry continued slowly.

“But...” Matthew protested loudly.

“Don’t want to hear it,” Harry interrupted, raising a hand and effectively silencing the boy.

“Hey, you can’t...” Alicia began

“But I can,” Harry interjected and gestured at himself with an arrogant smile. “In fact, watch me.”

“You’re a real git,” Matthew muttered sullenly under his breath

“That’s slander, I’ll sue,” Harry said briskly and Mathew fell silent, his mouth opening in surprise at the sheer absurdity of the statement.

“Sue?” Alicia said with a snort, as if she found the idea to be ludicrous.

“Don’t call me Sue, Jerry,” Harry retorted childishly and felt a pang of amusement when Alicia frowned, looking lost and confused.

‘It is permissible for you to act your age, beloved,’ Meciell offered wryly.

‘Where’s the fun in that?’ Harry asked in amusement.

“Will you stop acting like a...?” Daniel began, anger blossoming on his cheeks as he watched his younger brothers’ and sisters’ harassment.

“Shut up,” Harry cut in sharply.

“Don’t tell me...” Daniel started in righteous indignation.

“Shut up,” Harry repeated coolly and Daniel bristled.

“What’s it like?” suddenly Hope asked, a curious tone in her voice as she stared up at Harry, diffusing the tense situation between her older brother and the Denarian Knight.

“What’s what like, Hope?” Daniel asked snappishly.

“It,” Hope said helpfully.

“It?” Alicia asked in amusement.

Hope sighed and tapped the side of her head, giving Harry a meaningful glance. Alicia's mouth opened with a small 'oh' of understanding and Daniel frowned, giving her a severe look.

"You shouldn't ask about such things," He said crossly.

Harry rolled his eyes, both at Daniel's tone and at the questions, but decided to speak up.

"Actually, Hope," he said charmingly, shooting Daniel a cocky smile. "It's like having a family all in your head, and definitely one of the best things that ever happened to me in my life."

"Ah," Hope said in dawning comprehension while both Matthew and Alicia frowned.

"How can you say that?" Daniel asked Harry coldly, anger brewing in his eyes.

"Because it's true," Harry replied, just as coldly, and a thin smile curved his face. He straightened in his seat as he continued. "Meciel gives me power, more power than you could even dream of. She grants me immunity against old age and her vast knowledge of the world. Hell, she has memories of a world so far back that your ancestors were still monkeys throwing pieces of shit at each other. I have a constant companion, family more than anything else, and I will never be alone as long as I live. What else do I need?"

"What about decency? Mercy? Patience? Kindness? Love?"

"Hey, I love Meciel," Harry said defensively. In his mind, he felt Meciel shudder and suddenly her affection seeped through him, warming his tired body. He let out a mental chuckle.

'Don't feel too special,' he thought dryly and felt her pang of amusement.

"How can you love it?" Daniel asked, his face scrunching up in disgust. Harry twitched, his easily riled temper flaring in face of the boy's apparent disgust.

There were only a few ways somebody could ever drive Harry into losing his temper, barring physical injury and the heat of the battle. Insulting Meciél was one of them. Images of Harry launching himself across the table and slugging the boy in the face filled his mind, but Meciél clamped down on them firmly and he sighed.

“Quite easily,” He said instead and allowed a sly smile to cross his face. He turned his head and gazed down at Hope, who was staring at him with her big, wide eyes. “You see Hope, when a boy and a girl love each other, they do things. But when the girl lives in the boys head, then the boy has to be a little more creative...”

“Alright, that’s enough!” Daniel said abruptly. He glowered at Harry and motioned at Hope. “Hope, get over here.”

The small girl ignored her brother and stared at Harry with nothing more than honest curiosity on her face.

“Is she nice?” She asked.

“To me, sure,” Harry answered with a shrug. A smile crossed his face. “She likes me.”

‘Don’t feel too special’ Meciél murmured, throwing his own words back at him, and Harry snorted in amusement.

“She’s going to devour your soul and take over your body,” Daniel said slowly, shaking his head in a mixture of frustration and sympathy. “It’s inevitable. They all do it. She will too.”

“Maybe,” Harry responded thoughtfully and scratched his chin. A startling image of him looking like Vesper’s mentally-crushed host sprang to his mind, but this time both he and Meciél clamped down on it firmly. “I doubt it though.”

“You doubt it?” Matthew asked, staring at Harry with narrowed eyes. “Why wouldn’t she do it to you if she’s done it to others?”

"She only does it with those she doesn't like," Harry said and gave him a smug smile. "She likes me."

"How can you be a Knight and a Denarian at the same time?" Alicia suddenly asked and Harry blinked. "Isn't a Denarian the antithesis of a Knight?"

"Anti-what?" Harry muttered but threw up a hand and shook his head when Alicia opened her mouth. "Never mind, I'll look it up. From what I know, I'm a Knight because God is evil."

"He is not," Hope burst out crossly and she levelled Harry with a furious, and very much ineffective, glare.

"Okay, maybe He's not evil," Harry relented and paused. "But He is a sadistic son of a bitch who likes playing really mean jokes. Although some of the stuff he lets you do when you're holding a sword is pretty cool."

"Like what?" Hope asked curiously, her anger fading as fast as it had appeared. Harry blinked at the small blonde's apparent mood swings but sighed.

"You know, you're just as chatty as Amanda," he said in irritation. It had the opposite affect and Hope beamed. "You're almost as annoying as well. Why can't you be like your brother- stupid, stubborn and resentful?"

"Do you like Amanda?" Alicia asked carefully and Harry turned to the other seat next to him, where the dark-haired girl was eying Harry with wicked amusement in her eyes. "And when I say like, I mean...like."

'When the time comes, I will let you curse her,' Meciell said abruptly and Harry felt her grumbling anger. 'What absurdity is that?'

"Hell no," Harry snorted, refocussing his attention on the real world. "I'd rather go out with a kangaroo. Actually, that would be fun...they're very good at bouncing, aren't they- if you catch my drift."

"Right..." Alicia said slowly, still smiling strangely.

"Not that I'm complaining, because believe me, I don't want to see her," Harry said with a frown, his gaze flickering down the table. "But where is the little brat anyway?"

"Magic school," Harry said delightedly and looked wistful. "I wanna be a wizard when I grow up, just like her."

"She's a witch, stupid," Hope snorted. "You can't be a witch because you're a boy."

"I want to do magic!" Harry said, looking hurt at his sister's words.

"Fat chance there," Harry snorted and the younger Harry looked crestfallen. "Unless, of course..."

"What?" Little Harry said quickly. "There's a way I can do magic?"

"Well, you could pick up a coin," the Denarian Harry murmured, a sly smile crossing his face as he gazed up at the roof, ignoring the chocked replies of many of the children. "They can make you magical."

"A coin?" Harry asked curiously, his brown eyes staring at Harry with the trust that only a young child could produce. "Where can I get one?"

"That's enough!" Daniel roared and jumped up from his seat, his eyes alight with fury. His face contorted with anger as he loomed over Harry, who looked decidedly unimpressed. "I won't have you corrupting my brother as well as my sister!"

"It was only a kitten," Harry said mildly. "It's not like Hope is about to summon a demon with the blood of a virgin, which, by the way, is not actually a good idea. It tends to make them randy and if they break lose, well; somebody's going to get raped."

"Amanda told me all about you," Daniel snapped, breathing harshly. Matthew grimaced and tried to tug on his brother's sleeve, but Daniel waved it off. "How you were her friend, her teacher. How you were teaching her spells, spells that hurt people. She's seen more of your wickedness than any of us and she fucking idolises you!"

"The loyalty of good people is pathetic, really," Harry said with a grin. Meciél whispered warnings in her ear but he shrugged them off. "You save a person's life and suddenly they think the world of you. It's a wonder why we evil guys haven't won already."

"Oh, shut up," Daniel snarled, slamming his hands down on the table. "Just shut up, you idiot! You think you're so smug, but who's here now, huh? Who had to run away from his home? Who was too weak..."

The second way to make Harry lose his temper was insinuating that he was weak. Perhaps it was because of the six years he spent in a downtrodden household, or perhaps it was because of his own natural arrogance. Regardless, Harry's temper flared up with rage.

"I am not weak!" Growled Harry, his pleasant face disappearing as the insult struck home. He jumped to his feet, glaring at Daniel with glinting eyes.

"Oh, is that a weak spot?" Daniel mocked. "You lost the fight, didn't you?"

"That doesn't mean I'm weak," Harry snarled, tightening his grip on the wand in his pocket. "I went up against a man who has surpassed death, who has made an entire society fear the sound of his name! A pathetic magic-less weakling like you couldn't even comprehend the powers that we both wielded against each other!"

Alicia and Matthew shivered at the ominous tone in Harry's voice and shuffled in their seats, while Hope and Harry shifted away from the older Denarian. Daniel, however, was too strung up in his rage to care.

"Wow," Daniel said sarcastically. "Aren't you cool?"

“Don’t push your luck, boy,” Harry threatened coldly.

‘Calm down, beloved...’ Meciél started patiently and Harry felt her attempts to soothe his growing rage. Her attempts were unsuccessful.

“Why don’t you take that stupid slut of a demon and get the hell out of our...” Daniel continued, his voice dripping with malice. He never got the chance to finish as Harry registered the insult to Meciél and snapped.

His wand was in his hand before he knew what he was doing, hellish light spilling from the notched runes. Tinkling bells were ringing in his head- or perhaps not, the children had their hands clasped over their ears- and an enormous pressure was pressing down on his mind. Dark magic flickered at the tip of his wand before a loud, blaring horn blasted into his ears with such force that Harry staggered back. There was a flash of silver light and suddenly Michael was in the room, his face grim.

“Stop this, Harry,” he commanded, his voice cracking at Harry like a whip. “Lower the wand!”

‘What have you done?’ Meciél snarled, anger reverberating in her voice. ‘I told you to behave!’

Harry’s heart was racing and his breathing was ragged but he lowered his wand, reluctantly releasing his grasp on Hellfire and taking a deep breath. His rage was disappearing and it was replaced with something that he absolutely despised- uncertainty.

“Dad...” Daniel started softly.

“No, Daniel,” Michael said, his voice hard, and Daniel flinched. “You have already done enough tonight.”

“Do you see?” demanded Charity, her beautiful face completely cold as she moved forward. She put her arms around Harry and motioned to Hope and Alicia as the two of them abandoned Harry to his side of

the table. "I won't have him in my house, Michael. I won't have him around my children!"

"Charity..." Michael started softly, lowering the sword and letting the silver light die.

"No!" Charity cried and Michael appeared taken aback by the passion in her voice. "I don't care if he's a knight or not! He could lead the enemy right to our home. Our home, Michael! Our children!"

"He was trying to seduce Harry and Hope into taking a coin," Daniel told her, despite his father's warning look, and Charity's face went white.

"Hey, I was only kidding..." Harry protested feebly. Events were spiralling out of control around him and suddenly he had no idea what was about to happen.

"Don't start with me!" Charity snapped and she rounded on him. "I don't care what you have to say! I don't care that you're homeless! I don't care that somebody is trying to kill you! My husband is the saint, not me! I only care about my children! You have to leave."

"Charity..." Michael tried again, placing a hand on his wife's shoulder. Charity acted as if she couldn't feel it and wordlessly gestured at the door behind Harry, her face set. She had made her decision.

"Fine then," Harry snarled, and suddenly his fury was coming back to him as he angrily pushed the chair away. Hellfire roared in his mind, accompanied by the warning tinkling bells, but he ignored them.

'Beloved...' Meciél started.

"No, Meciél," Harry snapped loudly. Some dim part of his mind enjoyed Charity's blanching face as she heard Harry talking to the Fallen. "It's clear we're not wanted here, despite the fact that we risked our necks to save her precious fucking children! Amanda would be dead without me, so would you and all of your little brats."

“And you would be dead without the help of my husband,” Charity replied coolly. “I think we’re even. Get out.”

Harry glared at her, hatred welling in his eyes as he stared at the ungrateful bitch. He was barely aware of the smoke curdling from suddenly glowing red runes on his wand, the strong scent of sulphur wafting into everybody’s noses. Little Harry was whimpering on his mother’s shoulder while Alicia and Matthew had backed away and were watching the scene nervously. Hope was staring between her mother and Harry with a confused, pleading expression.

“Don’t fight, Mum,” she begged timidly, her eyes welling with tears.

“Here’s a lesson for you, kid,” Harry snarled angrily as he pocketed his wand. “Don’t help anybody, ever, because you get nothing out of it.”

“Get out,” Charity intoned coldly. “I never want to see you again.”

“Finally, we have something in common,”

“Harry...” Michael started desperately.

Harry wasn’t having any of it and, after picking up the cane resting by the table, he whirled around and left the kitchen. With long, angry strides, he opened the front door and slammed it behind him as hard as he could. He could hear blood throbbing behind his ears as his fury surged through his veins, powered by unholy Hellfire. The angelic wards on the house were constricting around him but they let him past as he strode onto the street and took a left.

‘That was well played,’ Meciell said evenly but Harry could sense her anger, and worse, her disappointment. His own anger grew and he let out a wordlessly snarl, lashing out with his foot at a letter box and breaking it in two.

‘Oh shut up,’ he snapped and paused. ‘Besides, they were insulting you more than me.’

‘It may come to a surprise to you, but I can put away my personal feelings to attain a goal,’ Meciell responded coolly as Harry turned a

corner, winding up in front of some kind of suburban park. 'In this case, it was a place to sleep for the night.'

'You know what, Meciél, you can just...' Harry started but suddenly he paused. Despite his raging anger, he could sense that something was wrong. A flickering tingle played at his mind, like a TV with a bad reception and comprehension dawned in his mind just as it happened.

From out of nowhere, a slender needle of flame lanced at him, so bright that it lit up the entire park. Harry instinctively ducked and winced as heat seared at the base of his neck as the needle flew past him and tore into the pavement, slicing through it with the ease of an arc welder.

'They are cloaked!' Meciél hissed and paused. 'Behind you, next to the tree, I can hear their heartbeat!'

'Effodio!' Harry barked out. A silver flash of light, tinged with fiery Hellfire, blasted out and suddenly an agonising scream burst out into the night. The tree was torn to splinters and, with a loud creak, toppled to the ground, right onto the newel revealed figure. Harry took a deep breath, fighting off the weariness in his body. The duel with Voldemort had taxed him.

'Behind you!' Meciél warned. 'We are at a disadvantage! Retreat!'

Harry whirled around, his wand flying up and a glimmering sphere of defensive magic's whirling around him as he prepared to apparate. In the split second that it would take him to flee, one of the attackers was suddenly there. Harry caught a glimpse of a grey cloak that covered the man's body before a silver blade nicked lightly across his shield.

The shield, which would have protected him from a runaway bus, collapsed with a loud screeching noise, akin to tearing metal. For a split second, Hellfire raged uncontrollably as it flared up into a brilliant, yellow light, raw power with no construct, before it detonated in a loud boom.

Harry was thrown off his feet by the backlash of the spell. Heat scorched his body and face and he landed on the ground with a dazed thump, pain flittering around his back. Dimly, he could hear the pained groans of the other man and smell the distinctive odour of sizzling flesh. Before he could stand, a man loomed above him, his face grim with determination and anger. Harry caught a proper glimpse of his cloak and recognition flooded his features before a flash of bright light filled his vision before his world went dark.

In a matter of seconds, Harry Potter, the wizard who had stood up against Voldemort in a face-to-face duel, had been taken down by surprise and captured by the Wardens of the White Council.

A/N: I know the Warden's reactions in this are a little extreme, but for those who have read the Dresden Files know that this is exactly what they're like- especially Morgan. Some of them need a good arse-kicking, really. The segregation between Dresden-verse and Potter-verse is something I've had in mind all along, but it never really came up in DR. I hope it clears up a few things for you. Some of you may not like where this chapter leads, but c'mon, you know where this was heading. Don't worry; I have a really cool plot for Hogwarts, including some of the biggest twists of the entire series. I hope you enjoy the chapter.

The first thing Harry saw when he returned to consciousness was blackness. His vision had been totally obscured by a thick veil of cloth that hung around his head. It had a peculiar odour to it, of dust and mothballs, and Harry could detect the faintest hint of dried blood drifting into his nostrils. The cloth, combined with the sudden realisation that Meciél's burning presence had been blocked with some cold, hard mental intrusion and that there was a set of binders strapped his wrist, caused a feeling that Harry was not used to feeling.

It was fear.

Panic surged through his veins and he let out a loud groan as he clambered to his knees, trying to peer through the veil surrounding his face as he swung his head back and forth. He heard a small scuffle, like shoes on gravel, and suddenly something grabbed his arms and lifted him up. An instant later, the person was dragging him forward, Harry's feet automatically falling back into the familiar pattern of walking.

"What the hell is this?" Harry snarled, drawing anger from his fear and tensing his muscles.

He lashed out blindly, his fists and legs swinging through the air. He hit the person dragging him forward a few times and satisfaction flared in his mind as he heard a low growl of annoyance. Suddenly the person stopped and Harry stumbled. An instant later he was picked up and slammed into something hard. Pain flared across his mind and without Meciél to numb the pain, he let loose an involuntary

gasp as the breath was driven from his lungs. He gasped, loud, hacking coughs filling his ears, and he was dimly aware of the person pulling him forward once more.

After a few minutes of involuntary follow-the-leader, Harry was brought to a place full of soft, muttering whispers. Despite his fear-wracked mind, he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down. Some of the voices sprang at him and he recognised English, German and a few other foreign languages that sounded familiar. Suddenly he was knocked to his knees and he collapsed with a loud grunt, his body starting to ache from its rough treatment. Shivering with both cold and no little anxiety, Harry remained silent as the whispers died down, leaving a terrible silence. There was a faint scuffing noise, as if somebody had scraped something along the ground, and suddenly Harry's back was tingling as he felt some kind of magical ward surround whatever place he was in. It was then the people started speaking - in Latin.

Normally, with Meciél by his side, Harry wouldn't have had a problem. Meciél was quite capable of translating Latin- or any language really- and feeding the English translation into his mind almost instantaneously. Now, with Meciél locked away from him, Harry was virtually helpless as he strained his ears at the rapid flow of foreign phrases. A few words jumped out at him. He knew *veneficus* was wizard or caster of spells, *magus* was magic and *mortis* was death. One word practically leaped at him, however – *denarii*.

"You know, I'm not part of the Order of Blackened Denarius," Harry said loudly and paused as the Latin chanting abruptly cut out. Gaining a little confidence, he continued, his tone reverting back to his normal, snide self. "We had a little falling out. The usually stuff, really, they tried to kill me, I strangled one of them to death..."

Suddenly something was prodded into his ribs and Harry grunted, trying unsuccessfully to move his hands back, which were still locked in the binder, to rub his sore chest. He scowled, an expression that remained unseen, and he tried once more to peer through the veil.

"I'm going to guess that you're the White Council," he continued, his voice only hitched a little as he took a deep breath. "This isn't really

necessary, you know. I'm sort of your friend. I kill vampires and I don't like dark wizards either. Mostly because they try to kill me- hey, you know that the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"You detest dark wizards yet you use black magic?" A man growled into his ear, his voice rough, weary and spoken in perfect English, despite the crisp Germanic accent.

"Hearsay," Harry shot back automatically. The pit of dread in his stomach was getting heavier and heavier as he realised just what might happen to him before this meeting was over.

The White Council was the true-wizard's version of the Ministry of Magic, complete with its own laws and rules. However, they were a little harsher in their punishments. That is, any violation of their seven most sacred laws would result in execution. In the seven years since Harry had picked up Meciél's coin, he had broken most of those laws on more than one occasion. He had, of course, been very careful and had been long gone when any of their soldiers- Wardens- had shown up, or he had been hidden behind wards when doing so.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if the White Council had finally caught on.

Suddenly he frowned-although the expression remained hidden for the White Council members around him. His wrists were chafing against the binders and both shock and fear flashed through his mind as he recalled the last time he had felt these binders.

"Apparently, you like black magic as much as I do," Harry snarled, his fear jumping to anger in a millisecond. He held up his hands and showed the binders for all to see, dread throbbing in his stomach and rage flaring in his mind. "I remember these. These are the damn cuffs that Azzeh made, that Voldemort made! Where the hell did you get these!"

Harry heard more than a few shocked gasps from around whatever room he knelt in, before something hard and painful slammed in his back and sent him staggering to the ground. His face slammed against something hard and his eyes watered as his nose flared with pain.

“They were recovered from the remains of a dark ritual in England, “the Germanic man said coldly, more to the crowd than to Harry himself. “And it was revealed that they were designed specifically to restrain you. I am not surprised that you had something to do with that...carnage!”

Harry grunted as he was yanked back to his knees, just as somebody else started speaking- in English.

“Hang on, I know that voice!” The man exclaimed, his voice tantalisingly familiar to Harry’s ears. “Take the hood off. Let me see his face.”

“Protocol says...” Somebody else started.

“Don’t you want...?” The voice started again, exasperation in the man’s voice, and Harry suddenly recognised it.

“Dresden?” He interrupted. “Is that you? What the hell is going on?”

“You know him, Dresden?” The man behind Harry growled suspiciously and Harry heard Dresden heave a sigh.

“I might,” he said. “Take the hood off and I’ll tell you.”

There was a pause, as if the wizard behind him was waiting for permission, and suddenly the veil of darkness was lifted from his face. Harry blinked and slammed his eyelids shut as light hit his sensitive eyes. He cursed loudly and ducked his head, rubbing his eyes on his shoulder and blinking quickly as he glanced back up. Dresden, clad in the grey cloak of a warden, was staring at him with shock and let out a loud bark of laughter after seeing his face. Next to him, Molly, clad in brown robes, was staring at him with nothing less than total surprise.

“This is the evil Denarian you’ve been harping about, Morgan?” Dresden laughed and looked incredibly amused.

Harry felt the man behind him shift on his feet and dared a glance upwards. The Germanic man was glaring at Dresden now, resentment and old mistrust sifting in his eyes. Harry gazed around the room, taking in what lay before him. He was kneeling down in a grimy, disused warehouse of some sort. Light filtered in from the panelled-windows, which were covered in dust. Surrounding Harry were at least two dozen men and women in robes. Some wore the grey cloak of the wardens; others wore robes of plain brown. At the head of this warehouse were seven seats, four empty and three occupied. The identity of those sitting in the seats was quite clear to Harry.

They were the Senior Council, the leaders of the most powerful true-magic organisation in the world, the White Council. One of the wizards was wearing a turban, hiding all but his glittering eyes. The other was a tall Native American man with a natural expression of kindness and gentleness about him. Sitting between them was an older man, who looked every bit the stereotypical wizard. With piercing blue eyes, a long white beard and a wrinkled, wise face, Harry knew that this man was The Merlin. Not the real Merlin, of course, but the leader of the Senior Council and one of the most powerful men on the planet.

Oh, goodie.

"Why am I not surprised that you are associated with this...thing," Morgan spat out in disgust, giving Harry a sharp prod. Harry winced and glared at Morgan with furious green eyes- a glare that was quite ineffective given his current state.

"This is the mercenary that I hired to help me with those Vampire Counts in Indonesia," Dresden explained quickly, his eyes flickering to the Senior Council." Without him, those Counts would still be alive, their attack would have gone ahead as planned and half the people in this room would be dead- including you, Morgan."

Morgan's face twitched as mutterers sprung up from the circle of wizards, all who peered down at Harry curiously. Harry, in turn, tried to calm his beating heart and gave a brilliant smile, winking and waving his bound hands. Morgan jabbed him in the back again and

Harry winced, lowering his hands and watching as the Merlin raised his hand for silence.

“You claimed to have worked with this Denarian, Warden Dresden?” The Merlin said, forsaking Latin and speaking with a crisp upper-class English accent. For a moment, Harry thought that the older wizard looked a bit like Dumbledore before he spotted a flash of vindictiveness that flashed through the other man’s eyes. “Have you been working for black wizards, Warden Dresden?”

The circle instantly went still and all eyes swung to Dresden, who straightened as he realised what the Merlin was doing to him. Harry frowned, and seeing that his only ally here was about to get slammed, took a deep breath and spoke up in his usual cocky voice.

“African-American wizards,” he interrupted loudly and gave an arrogant smile as the Merlin blinked. “Come on, I know you’re upper-class British and all, but still, you can’t just go around bagging black people anymore. You have to be a little more politically correct, since you’re the leader....oh,” Harry trailed off and gave Merlin a wink. “I get it now...the ‘White’ Council. Very clever, very clever indeed...”

“Hell Bells!” Dresden swore softly as he rubbed his tired eyes. “Potter, it might be a good idea for you to stop talking right about now.”

“Regardless of whatever jobs he may have assisted you with, this Denarian has broken the laws of magic several times,” The Merlin said severely. He peered down at Harry, who stayed very still as the Merlin kept talking. “We have records of your crimes from the past seven years. You have taken life with black magic, summoned demons from the Nevernever, and distorted all that this council holds true. You have hidden yourself well all these years and but your wards have failed you this time.”

An impending sense of doom grappled with Harry’s heart as he listened to Merlin’s proclamations. There were many true-wizards who were nodding in agreement to Merlin’s words and only Dresden and Molly were looking conflicted. Harry, however, shrugged off his feelings and took a deep breath. He and Meciell had planned for something to like this. Hopefully it would work.

Hopefully.

“You don’t have the authority,” Harry snapped and an arrogant smile flickered across his face when the Merlin looked amused.

“But we do,” The Merlin said, almost gently. “We are the White Council. It is our duty to enforce the Laws of Magic, to protect the normal population from rogue magic users such as you.”

“Protect them from warlocks and sorcerers, sure,” Harry said and levelled the Merlin with a withering glare, a glare that the powerful wizard seemed to find amusing. “But they’re true wizards. They wield your magic. I don’t.”

The circle erupted with whispers as the Native American man leaned forward, staring at Harry intently.

“Are you telling us, child, that you are a wand-wizard?” He asked in a deep baritone.

“Well, gee, and here I was thinking that the wand might have given it away,” Harry shot back sarcastically. “Since it’s a...you know, wand and all.”

“If he is a wand-wizard,” the Native American man murmured softly. “Then we can not detain him.”

“This is outrageous!” Morgan snarled. “We have the evidence! He has committed murder using magic...”

“Wand-magic, Donald,” the Native-American man rebuked gently. “Magic that we have no authority over.”

Harry lifted his eyes upwards and saw that Morgan’s eyes were bulging in the sockets. He winced when the man’s grip on his shoulder tightened to the point that Harry knew he was going to have bruises tomorrow.

"I don't understand, Honoured Merlin," mumbled a man from the circle, a waif-like wizard with grey hair and enormous spectacles. "What does his magical focus have to do with his crimes?"

"There are two types of wizards," said the turban-covered man and the entire room stilled as a soft, enticing voice swept over the room. "There are those who draw magic from within and find power in our emotions, in life. That is us. There are also those who draw magic from an outward location, a realm of magic that they channel and utilise through their wands. These societies are segregated, kept apart by a set of ancient proclamations by the original Merlin."

"I don't understand, revered Gatekeeper," the greying wizard said, looking perplexed.

"Of course you don't," Harry muttered. "Look at you- you just scream 'retard!'"

"Long ago, Merlin was responsible for both the development of the White Council and the unification of rogue wand-wizard tribes in Europe," The Merlin continued, staring at Harry with cold eyes filled with a chilling anger.

"Can we make this go a little faster?" Harry offered and winced when Morgan's grip on his arm tightened. "Hey, this is my life we're talking about! I kinda want to know if you're going to murder me."

Harry saw more than a few flinches at the word 'murder' and felt satisfaction flare up in his gut. However, the Senior Council did not look impressed.

"Merlin helped stabilise both factions and introduced a system of government," the Native-American wizard said patiently. "He formed the White Council for us and the seven different Wizengamots for the wand-wizards. With this, he mandated that both parties had a separate role to fill in the world and declared that they would remain separate, independent from each other, so that if one were to fall, the other would remain."

“Basically, it means that I’m immune,” Harry said with a self-satisfied smile. “It’s probably why you don’t go after the Dark Lords that get loose and try to off those poor, innocent wand-wizards.”

“Indeed,” The Merlin said. “We cannot be expected to take care of the wand-wizard problems. We have enough of our own as it is.”

“Wand-wizard problems like me,” Harry said, emphasising the statement with a pointed look at the true-wizards that had encircled him.

“The real question here is not about what crimes this Denarian has committed,” the wizard with the turban- the Gatekeeper- murmured. “But if he comes under the jurisdiction of the White Council.”

His glinting eyes rested on Harry, who stared back defiantly. Behind him, Morgan literally snarled out loud and spoke up in a thunderous voice.

“He is a Denarian!” He growled. “And Fallen Angels come under our jurisdiction! I have never heard of a wand-wizard being host to one of the Fallen!”

“I have heard of three,” the Gatekeeper murmured softly and Morgan fell silent. “All fell to their kin in battle. Wand-wizards are notoriously hard to seduce and the Fallen do not reap the benefits for quite some time, unless, of course, the host is exceptionally powerful.”

Harry opened his mouth to speak, a superior smile stretching his lips, but he was interrupted as Molly, of all people, spoke up in his defence.

“He may be a Denarian...” she said, stammering slightly as the entire Council focussed their attention on her. Harry could feel a deep seated fear within her and made a mental note of it. Molly took a deep breath and plunged on. “He may be a Denarian but he is also a knight of the Cross.”

Harry opened his mouth again but was interrupted by a loud snort of disbelief from the man behind him.

“Impossible,” Morgan snapped. “A Denarian cannot be a Knight of the Cross.”

There was a round of murmuring agreements from the rest of the robed wizards, although the Senior Council remained silent and watched the proceedings with carefully constructed expressions.

“Why not, Morgan?” Dresden challenged and the murmurs died down. “We don’t make the rules for the Knights. If God decided to make Harry here a Knight, then He must have had a reason.”

“We did find a sword among his belongings,” One of the wardens said, looking uncomfortable. “It was concealed in a wooden cane. We did not inspect it too closely, in fear of activating any curses or wards built into it.”

“I’ve seen him wield Fidelacchius and slice a vampire in two,” Dresden said. “He’s a Knight- got it when he was clearing up that Outsider mess in England, the one where our Wardens didn’t get there in time. Without Harry, we would have a Dark Lord with all the powers of an Outsider doing his best to conquer the world. We owe him.”

“He’s a murderer,” Morgan barked coldly. “He has broken the laws of magic. You of all people know what that entails, Dresden.”

“You can’t kill me,” Harry said firmly, doing his best to keep his voice level. Excitement was rushing through his veins- he might not be killed after all. “I’m a wand-wizard.”

“Can you prove it?” The Native-American man asked slowly.

“Sure,” Harry said with a cold smile. “Give me my wand and a few minutes alone with the dickhead behind me and I’ll show you just how capable I am with my...wand.”

“Potter!” Dresden hissed, making a sharp motion with his hands. Harry narrowed his eyes but he let out a soft sigh and closed his mouth, knowing that the other wizard was right. He should probably keep the antagonising to a minimum.

"The real question," somebody said and Harry looked up to see Gatekeeper talking, his soft voice silencing everybody. "What is a wand-wizard? Is it the ability to wield a wand? I too could do such a thing, although nothing compared to what our young Denarian friend here can. Am I a wand-wizard then?"

"Proficiency, perhaps?" The Native-American wizard murmured speculatively. "What do the laws say about matters such as this?"

"We will finish the conversation without our guest here," The Merlin suddenly spoke up. "He has not earned the right...or the privilege... to learn about White Council lore."

"I agree," The Gatekeeper murmured. "We should discuss this matter in private."

"Very well," the Merlin said and nodded past Harry's head at Morgan. "Remove him."

"Hey!" Harry started but suddenly there was a flash of light in front of his eyes and then he knew no more.

Some time later, Harry found himself furiously pacing around the small, dingy room that turned into a make-shift cell. The rusted door tingled at the touch and Harry, even without Meciél, could faintly sense the powerful spells that had been woven into it. It was enough to make his hair stand up on end- all of it.

"I look like a bloody porcupine," Harry growled as he attempted to flatten his hair with his palm. He glowered at the door with an annoyed scowl, idly kicking at the ground. He had been waiting for over an hour for somebody to come back and get him, and who knows how long he had been unconscious for.

The door remained obstinately closed and Harry heaved a sigh, resuming his pacing and shivering at the cold temperature in the room. His breath was coming out in little puffs of white mist and his toes were beginning to prickle painfully. Emotionally, Harry was a whirlwind of emotions, the most predominate being fear. Fear that the

White Council would execute him. Fear that they would take Meciél away from him. Fear that he would never get a chance to talk to Meciél again.

His hands, still clasped in his binders, rose to rub his chest, his eyes distant. He had long since hidden the coin that housed the link to Meciél's spirit within his body, to make it harder for people to take it from him. He was a little unsure of the exact location of the coin. Meciél had once entertained Harry for several hours playing 'guess where I've shoved it this time' but Harry had stopped playing after he had felt a very cold sensation in the lower regions. After that, he had decided that it was best not to wonder where she had put it. Wherever it was, it was either well hidden or too much of a bother for the Wardens to remove it.

Of course, they could have also decided that since he was being executed, it probably didn't matter anyway.

Suddenly the door creaked open and Harry's heart jumped as two burly wardens, clad in grey cloak and silver sword, entered the room. Their faces were made of stone as they strode across the room and clasped Harry by the shoulders, almost painfully. A hood made of black cloth was shoved over Harry's face and suddenly his world was reduced to darkness, the sensation of his feet stumbling over cracks in the unseen floor and a strong scent of dust and faded blood. Dread crept in Harry's heart and suddenly he was very afraid.

Harry was led through a number of twists and turns until the tingle at the back of his neck told him that he was back in the large room again. He grunted as something slammed into the back of his legs and he dropped down to his knees, taking a deep breath and waiting with bated breath. There was an ominous silence before the grave voice of the Merlin lifted in the air.

"The Senior Council has judged the unique circumstances surrounding your case, Denarian, and we have reached a unanimous verdict," The Merlin said and Harry waited, his heart pounding in his chest. "With Warden Dresden's testimony, we do find that you are indeed skilled in the arts of wand-magic."

Triumph and relief burst out in Harry's chest and he almost sagged in relief. A smile was curling his lips from behind the black hood but it faded as the Merlin continued.

"However, there is no doubt that you are skilled in our forms of magic, especially in the deep, blackest aspects of the art," The Merlin said and Harry heard the terrible judgement behind his voice. "That you have allied yourself with a Fallen merely emphasises this part."

"But..." Harry started.

"As you know," The Merlin continued, rebutting Harry before his words had even left his mouth. "The White Council and the wand-wizard communities are segregated and independent of one another. To belong to one group there are certain criteria that you must fulfil. In the case of the White Council, you must have the necessary strength and skill to pass our tests. You, Denarian, pass that aspect of our requirements, although you would fail with regard to your considerable lack of ethics."

"The various forms of wand-wizard government and institutions around the world have different requirements than us," another intoned in a smooth, deep voice, and Harry recognised it as belonging to the Native-American wizard. "In your case, we picked the British Ministry of Magic as the institution that we would apply to you. They decree that in order to gain the most basic of professions within the lower ranks of the Ministry, you must be recognised by the Ministry of Magic as a qualified wizard. In other words, you must have passed a series of examinations called Ordinary Wizarding Levels."

"Because you are not a member of any educational institution that has the ability to grant you these requirements, it is the Senior Council's judgement that we find you to be under our jurisdiction and, as such, we accuse and hold you accountable to your actions," The Merlin said. His voice appeared to be bored, as if he was used to such a mundane act, but Harry could sense the genuine distaste that the other wizard held for him. "It is the Senior Council's will that finds you guilty of breaking the Laws of Magic. The sentence of such a heinous crime is....execution, carried out by the sword of justice. Morgan, you may approach."

Harry's heart was racing and icy cold feel, mixed with blazing desperation, filled his mind. He heard somebody approach him, their footsteps becoming ominous booms that counted down the seconds to Harry's death. Dimly, he could hear Dresden and Molly protest but most of his mind was racing to find a way- any way! - to prevent what was about to happen. The footsteps stopped and Harry could literally feel the body heat as Morgan towered over his blinded form. There was a chilling hiss of metal scraping on metal, a soft exhale of breath, a brush of air as something was lifted into the air- and suddenly, it hit him.

"Wait!" Harry called out desperately. "I am a member of an educational institution! I was a student of Hogwarts last year!"

"So we know," murmured a voice that could only be the Gatekeeper.

"We did not think that it was a permanent position," the Native-American wizard said in surprise. "Given that the academic year has begun and you have not attended."

"I'm still taking the OWLs, though," Harry said quickly, his heart racing madly. He could almost envision the gleaming silver sword ready to take his head off and frantically kept trying to talk, anything to stall. "Ask Dumbledore! Ask the Headmaster! He'll agree with me! I'm a wand-wizard!"

There was a soft burst of mutterings and suddenly the room was full of whispers. Harry waited with bated breath as the Senior Council was silent for a minute, his hands clenched tightly together and his muscles poised. If they refused to accept this then he was not going down without a fight. Finally, one of the members must have made a gesture to Morgan because Harry heard the hiss of metal against metal and suddenly the Warden was moving away. The Denarian Knight breathed a huge sigh of relief, barely noticing the trickles of sweat that were beading down his forehead.

"Very well," The Merlin said reluctantly. "The revered Gatekeeper insists that we consult this 'Headmaster Dumbledore' on the matter. Warden Morgan and three others will escort you to this school of

Hogwarts. If the Headmaster confirms your story, then you will be granted immunity from White Council prosecution, provided that you achieve your Ordinary Wizzarding Level's by the end of the educational year. If you do not, you will be brought back here, tried and convicted."

"So, what?" Harry said slowly. "You'll kill me if I don't do my homework?"

"Essentially, yes," The Merlin said and Harry could envision the cold smile that had crossed the other man's face.

Suddenly Harry was yanked up off the ground and onto his feet. He winced, his kneecaps aching and his body almost shaking at the adrenaline rushing through his system. As Harry was forcefully turned around to leave, the Merlin's voice washed over the ears and sent a spike of fear down Harry's back.

"If you become a recognised member of the wand-wizard community, then the White Council will not pursue you for your past crimes. However, should a warden chance upon you causing harm against the innocent, know that they will not hesitate to strike you down where you stand, wand-wizard or not."

With that, Harry was led from the room with relief dancing through his veins. A wide and unseen smile was stretched across his face but it faded as he thought about the next hitch in his plan. Would Dumbledore agree? Probably, Harry concluded, but what would it cost him?

A/N: And now we're back to the prologue. It's been forty-thousand words but now the story can truly start. As you'll see, I'm setting up a relationship between Dumbledore and Harry. Both have different goals and agendas that they want to get through, but both are ultimately against Voldemort. Reviews are appreciated.

Present Day

"...and that's about it," Harry finished dully. "We went through the Nevernever, wound up in the forest, I broke loose when we entered the castle and they caught up with me again."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, leaning back in his chair and absently stroking his long, white beard. The small group of wardens plus one prisoner had relocated to the Headmaster's office for some privacy. Harry's eyes flickered over the room, noting that it hadn't changed at all since the last time he had been here. The moving portraits were snoozing- or at least, pretending to snooze- something that captured the attention of a short-haired female Warden, who couldn't stop gaping. A row of delicate instruments glinted in the warm light emanating from the flickering fireplace. The perch that occupied Dumbledore's fiery phoenix was empty.

"Is this black wizard here telling us the truth, wand-wizard?" Morgan demanded harshly. His face looked as if it could have been carved from stone and both he and Harry waited in anticipation, both for totally different reasons.

Harry didn't think that Dumbledore would refuse, especially after all that had happened the last time he had been here. That said, an icy cold slither of fear was shooting through his stomach and suddenly doubt crept in his mind. Surely, Dumbledore wouldn't refuse...surely the old man wouldn't let him be killed.

"I asked you a..." Morgan started but was silenced with a simple motion of Dumbledore's hand.

Despite the power that Harry could sense in the hardened warden, there was little doubt in anybody's mind about just who was in control

here. It made the wardens edgy and Harry had to suppress a grimace as Morgan's hands tightened down on his shoulders. Dumbledore was looking extremely contemplative and his eyes were staring off into the distance. After a few moments, he blinked and then gave a little start.

"Ah, yes," he said with twinkling eyes. "Forgive me. Wizards my age tend to drift off into their daydreams...but of course, dreams should never supersede the reality of life. Now, where were we?"

"Is this boy telling us the truth?" Morgan demanded again.

"But of course," Dumbledore exclaimed. "Harry here is a valued member of the Hogwarts student body. Yes, some business opportunities forced him to take an extended holiday period but it was always expected that he would return."

"And you're aware of One of the other wardens asked in disbelief.

"Of course," Dumbledore said with a gentle smile. "We accept all manner of students here at Hogwarts, whether they are stricken with the curse of the werewolf, blessed with the beauty of a Veela, or have the spirit of a fallen angel dwelling in their heads."

"Very well," Morgan said stiffly. "We shall leave him into your care. Know that if he does not fulfil the requirements of his release, we will find him and kill him."

"I am curious," Dumbledore said slowly. "What exactly has Harry here been accused of?"

"We have evidence that the Denarian here has been murdering innocents and sacrificing non-magical people to summoned demons for the past seven years," Morgan said severely. His eye twitched as he turned his gaze upon Harry, who stared back with a cocky smile on his face. "He is a murderer. He consorts with demons and beings most foul. He wields black magic. He is scum, Dumbledore, and you are protecting him."

"I see," Dumbledore said slowly, but made no other movement. He gestured to Harry's cuffs with a wrinkled, gnarled hand and smiled politely. "Could I trouble you to remove these bindings from my student? I am sure that I could do so myself, but this way would be much easier for all parties concerned."

Morgan grimaced but moved forward and yanked Harry's arms up. Harry winced in protest at this a painful movement but remained silent as Morgan fiddled with the locking mechanism. The cuffs opened and fell off and suddenly Hellfire roared in his veins. It was as the dam that had been holding all back had collapsed and it raged forward, bringing about it a wave of unbelievable pleasure. With the Hellfire came Meciél's magnificent presence and Harry could feel both the terrible anger she held towards the White Council and the relief she felt as she embraced his mind.

'That was most unpleasant,' Meciél said icily.

'Tell me about it,' Harry grumbled and paused. 'Are you alright?'

'I am fine, beloved,' Meciél reassured him soothingly and some part of Harry nearly sagged in relief. 'The experience was merely disconcerting, not painful. It was as if I was inside a giant sphere, where I could see and hear everything yet nobody could see or hear me. It was much like it was last time.'

Harry smiled and his face softened with real affection. From behind his desk, Dumbledore watched the reunion with a polite expression on his face, not revealing any of his true emotions. The aged Headmaster turned back to Morgan, who tucked the cuffs into the back of his grey cloak.

"Was there anything else, Warden Morgan?" He asked politely.

Morgan sneered but Dumbledore's gaze remained polite, and the Warden gathered himself up. With a quick gesture to his two companions, he strode out of the Headmaster's office with a furious scowl on his face, levelling Harry one last glare. Harry sneered back at the Warden but looked away as one of Morgan's companions dropped a bundle of objects on Dumbledore's desk, including but not

limited to his wands, the Sword of the Cross and the bag of tinkling golden galleons. The warden ducked out of the room a second later, leaving Harry and Dumbledore alone.

"In a moment, Harry," Dumbledore said abruptly and suddenly the air exploded in a flash of red flames and a haunting melody. Harry winced as the song drove into his head and Fawkes, Dumbledore's Summer Fae, landed on his shoulder. Her black eyes bore into his and Harry squirmed under the other entity's knowing gaze.

"Go fuck a duck," Harry growled under his breath and broke eye contact. Fawkes let out a soft trill as Dumbledore attached a message to her leg, looking quite serious.

"To Kingsley and Nymphadora, quickly," He murmured softly. Fawkes let out another trill and nipped Dumbledore on the ear in a sign of affection and possessiveness, before soaring off Dumbledore's shoulder and disappearing in a flash of flames. Dumbledore turned back to Harry with a grave expression. "Although the White Council has said that they will not prosecute you, I have no doubt that they will alert the Department of Magical Law Enforcement of your crimes. Luckily, I have a few contacts that may be able to make the whole thing disappear."

"Thanks," Harry muttered awkwardly. He glanced away from Dumbledore's gaze, focussing on the tinkling objects and thick tomes positioned on the towering bookshelves. For a moment, Harry was sure that Dumbledore would bring up his crimes, but the older Headmaster made no mention of Morgan's allegations.

"Well, Harry, you have found yourself in quite the predicament," Dumbledore said after a moment's silence. He made a slight motion with his hand and suddenly a tray appeared, holding two steaming cups of hot chocolate. Dumbledore picked one up and sipped it, while motioning for Harry to take the other. Naturally, Harry declined.

"I have, haven't I?" Harry said and sighed. "You know, it's been a real shitty day. First Voldemort attacks my apartment and then the White Council nabs me from the street."

“Voldemort,” Dumbledore said sharply.

“Oh, didn’t hear about that part?” Harry asked curtly, his anger beginning to simmer. “Yeah, like I said, Voldemort. Tall guys, red eyes, really cool spells. Is that ringing any bells in that...”

‘Try not to insult him,’ Meciél advised, interrupting his speech, and Harry sighed.

“It is troubling that he was able to locate you,” Dumbledore mused carefully, ignoring Harry’s half-finished sentence. He wore a troubled frown and seemed to be in deep thought.

“He was only able to locate me because I was out looking for the information you wanted,” Harry snapped and was pleased when Dumbledore’s eye’s lost their twinkle and he suddenly seemed to age. “It looks like you were right. Voldemort and Vesper are working together. It’s the only way he could have found me. Then, when my fucking wards got blown to hell, the White Council decides arrest me!”

“Harry...” Dumbledore started softly.

“You know, I was doing pretty fucking well until you knocked on my door yesterday,” Harry growled and his eyes glinted with fiery power. An instant later, Meciél blazed his rage away with considerable effort, whispering soft, calming words into his ear.

“I feel as if I must apologise,” Dumbledore said, looking weary. He took another sip of his tea and let out a soft sigh as he leaned back in his chair. “I have caused you undue distress. It was not my intention.”

“Oh, well, if you’re sorry then everything’s just fucking perfect,” Harry muttered sourly, but most of his rage has dissipated, leaving a hollowed, emotionally-wearied shell behind. It had been a long day for him, a very long day.

“I must ask, did you uncover any information that may prove useful to me?” Dumbledore queried, taking another sip of his hot chocolate and peering over the rim of the cup.

"I did," Harry said cautiously, frowning and folding his arms across his chest. He suppressed a wince and he rubbed his sore wrists. An instant later, Hellfire surged through his veins and the aches and pains in his body faded under a gentle haze of power. "I've got half a mind to say 'go fuck yourself' though."

'Beloved, he did just save your life,' Meciél said softly. 'What's more, it might be best to remain in his favour. It seems that you will be spending another year at this school- a school that he runs.'

Harry made a face and rolled his eyes, ignoring Dumbledore's twinkling eyes and knowing glance. The Headmaster looked as if he knew exactly what Meciél had just said and a benign smile crossed his face as he lowered his cup onto his saucer with a soft chink.

"I suppose some extra monetary compensation would make up for this inconvenience," Dumbledore said slowly and looked amused when Harry perked up. "After all, you have suffered as a result of taking this job. Perhaps, say, an extra twenty-five percent will help you."

"For this, try triple," Harry said flatly and gave Dumbledore a challenging look. "At least."

"If you require more money then perhaps I can offer you an extra fifty-percent," Dumbledore said smoothly, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

Harry ran his tongue over his lips, his eyes narrowed and his mouth working over as if he were chewing something. Finally, after a few moments had passed, he seemed to come to a decision.

"Double," he interjected slowly. "And no lower. Remember, Dumbledore, I have information that will help you with your little civil war."

Dumbledore stared back and after a moment's pause, gave a decisive nod.

"We are agreed," he said briskly.

“Good,” Harry said and leaned back into his chair, holding in his tired sigh and watching Dumbledore suspiciously. “I’ll write up what I know tomorrow.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said. “I will deposit the original two thousand galleons to your vault at Gringotts, along with another two thousand galleons for your trouble.”

“Ah, no,” Harry said quickly, shaking his head as Dumbledore finished. “Recent events make it hard for me to stroll down Diagon Alley, you know, appearing at Hogwarts with a dead Quidditch player by my side. You can exchange that to muggle money- at a good exchange rate, by the way, and give it to this account here. I’ll- hang on, I have a vault?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore answered simply and Harry blinked. “Your parents were by no means rich, but they had amassed a small amount of gold before their death. Unfortunately, there is not as much as you would have hoped. A year and a half in seclusion drained quite a large amount of money from their accounts. Still, there is enough to have covered your seven years across Hogwarts, and a few years in the training for your next profession.”

“I have a vault?” Harry asked a moment later, still looking befuddled. Confusion was replaced with anger and he narrowed his eyes. “Just when were you going to tell me about this?”

“I presumed that you had known of the vault,” Dumbledore said and looked at Harry earnestly. Harry didn’t sense a single instance of deceit coming from the man- of course; if Dumbledore was lying then he probably wouldn’t know anyway. Reaching into one of his pockets, Dumbledore produced a small golden key and handed it over to Harry. “I know that you have been to Gringotts and I merely thought that you had found another way to access your vault, which was why you did not come to me for your key.”

“I get the feeling I’ve been played here,” Harry muttered sourly as he took the key and examined it closely. He let out a sigh, feeling too

tired and emotionally drained to raise a fuss. "Still, what can I do now? Besides, I guess...I guess I owe you my life."

"I did nothing less than I would have done for any of my other students," Dumbledore said, taking another sip of his cup with a soft sigh. He wrapped his wrinkled hands around the hot cup and stared at Harry with an honest blue gaze. "I will admit though; I was quite worried when you burst into the Great Hall like that, although I believe that is one of our most memorable entrances that I can remember."

"Ah, crap," Harry muttered sourly. He fingered his wand with narrowed eyes as he continued. "Just let one of the little bastards make fun of me- I dare them to."

"And on that note, I believe we need to have a little discussion about your re-enrolment to this school," Dumbledore said quickly, lowering his mug and peering at Harry with serious blue eyes. "I understand that the events that led you here last year were unique, and the events that have led you here this year are even more unique, but I'm afraid that I cannot permit you to behave in the same manner as you did before."

"What?" Harry uttered, blinking in surprise. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What the hell are you up to Dumbledore? If this is some kind of redemption trick..."

"Harry, the fact that you wield one of the holiest items known to man is enough to satisfy my desire to see you redeemed," Dumbledore interrupted. "No, I

"Things are different now," Dumbledore said, sighing heavily. "I have told you that the Ministry of Magic has chosen to ignore my warnings about Lord Voldemort's return. I have told you that they have attempted to discredit me, and to a lesser extent you. What I have not told is that it is succeeding."

Harry watched as Dumbledore seemed to age before his eyes, looking weary and tired.

"I have been removed from my post in the Wizengamot and dismissed from my position at the International Confederation of Wizards," Dumbledore explained tiredly. The portraits on the walls eyed him with sympathy as he continued. "I have endured scorn and ridicule from all pegs of society and now my position at this very school is under attack."

"Whoa," Harry said slowly, looking concerned. "You're the only one who can keep me alive, Dumbledore. You can't leave."

"There may come a time when I have no choice in the matter," Dumbledore said grimly. Harry almost winced as a flash of hot anger passed through the elder wizard's eyes. The other mug of untouched hot chocolate was bubbling over, warm frothy liquid spilling onto the tray. "The Ministry have appointed a new defence teacher. Not only does she lack the proper skills, I suspect that Professor Umbridge is also acting as a spy of sorts."

"I gather that you don't like this woman," Harry said warily, eying the dripping mug with cautious eyes. "You know, I could kill her for you. Free of charge, as well, as long as it makes my life here a little easier."

"She represents the very worst of the Wizarding society as a whole," Dumbledore replied, ignoring but, to Harry, not dismissing the offer. His anger suddenly drained away, leaving behind a tired old man. "I apologise for my outburst, Harry. I have been under quite a lot strain recently. It is hard, trying to organise a defence against a Dark Lord that nobody wants to believe exists."

Harry shifted in his seat, a tiny part of him both enjoying and cringing at the sight of the most powerful wizard he knew- barring Voldemort, of course- looking so tired. Inside his head, he could also feel Meciél's concern and felt a flash of surprise.

'I do admire this man,' Meciél said softly, wistfully. 'He almost reminds me of somebody I once knew, long, long ago.'

"If it makes you feel better, Meciél likes you," Harry said with a quick wink, which made Dumbledore blink in surprise. "That's got to say something about you. I mean, she doesn't even like me half the time."

'Oh, you're so sensitive,' Meciél murmured teasingly.

"I am honoured," was all Dumbledore said before shaking his head, blinking his eyes repeatedly. "And we seem to have drifted off topic. Alas, the bane of my old age- a forgetful memory. What were we discussing?"

"My behaviour," Harry muttered a touch glumly. "It's all I seem to be hearing about lately."

'Oh, grow up,' Meciél said exasperatedly, although in good humour. 'I'm not that bad.'

'Make me,' Harry mentally responded.

'How mature,' Meciél remarked dryly.

'I learned from the best,' Harry shot back and Meciél let out a tinkling laugh.

'Oh, beloved, I do like you,' she said wistfully. Harry suppressed a smile and turned his attention back to Dumbledore, the interaction between Meciél and Harry taking only an instant.

"Ah, that's right," Dumbledore murmured, nodding sagely. "Now, with Professor Umbridge reporting back to the Ministry of Magic, you understand how you must appear to be as normal a student as possible. You cannot afford to draw any undue attention to yourself."

"She'll expel me?" Harry asked.

"She does not have the power, not just yet," Dumbledore replied. "Nonetheless, I strongly suggest that you do not antagonise her. If I am banished from the school, so be it. I will continue the fight against Lord Voldemort elsewhere. If you are banished from the school, then it will mean your death."

"Do I have to?" Harry asked, in almost a whining voice.

"Yes, Harry, I'm afraid so," Dumbledore answered.

"Great," Harry muttered. "Just great. So, what, I have to do my homework or something?"

"You need to do your homework, wear the proper uniform, be respectful to teachers, restrain your wand, and so forth," Dumbledore answered, and blinked when Harry let out a bark of laughter. Harry's smile died down as he noticed that Dumbledore was being completely serious.

"Oh, for the love of..." He groaned and shook his head despairingly. "Dumbledore, I don't know if you've noticed but you have an entire school full of retards. I might not be able to restrain myself."

"All I ask is that you try," Dumbledore said heavily. The former headmasters in the portrait surrounding the Dumbledore's table let out small noises of grumbling, most staring at Harry with annoyance or derision.

"Try?" Harry repeated and smiled slyly. He looked very pleased with himself as he folded his arms and leant back in his comfortable chair. "I can try."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows but looked fairly amused as Harry rubbed his hands together, looking very mischievous. But Harry's expression turned serious and he let out a sigh.

"Oh, fine," he grumbled. "I'll be good- but only because I like my head. It's got all the features I need, dashing green eyes, handsome, aristocratic features and a rakishly charming smile."

"Of course you do," Dumbledore said, almost patronisingly, and there was an amused spark to his light blue eyes.

"Were you just hitting on me?" Harry asked shrewdly. "Cause you're not my type, Dumbledore. For one, you've got more wrinkles than a woman's unironed panties."

"I'm afraid you do not meet the requirements for a potential partner, Harry," Dumbledore explained and smiled mysteriously at Harry's start of surprise.

"Ooh, rejected by an old man," Harry said and gave an expressive wince. Suddenly he blinked and stared at Dumbledore in surprise. "Did you just make a joke?"

"Why, yes," Dumbledore answered. "I believe I just did."

Harry made a face and fell silent and an awkward silence fell upon the room. Harry was fidgeting in his chair, looking irritable and maybe even a touch nervous. Across the other side of the warmly lit room sat Dumbledore, looking as regal and patient as any wizard that Harry had ever met before.

"You've probably got a better spin on what Voldemort's doing than I do," Harry admitted sourly after enough time had elapsed. "What's fuck-face been up to?"

"I thought you didn't care about him," Dumbledore reminded him gently, absently flicking his wand and removing the cups of hot chocolate from his pristine desk. They disappeared without a sound and Dumbledore placed his wand away.

"And I thought that I had a lovely apartment with honest-to-god silk sheets on my bed," Harry snapped back, before sighing and rubbing his eyes. "I'd like to know that's been going on. Can you at least tell me that?"

Dumbledore sighed and locked his fingers together, his expression growing troubled. He ran his eyes over his office and Harry noted shrewdly that he was examining some of the delicate silver instruments on his large shelves as he contemplated his answer.

"He is biding his time, raising his former servants and preparing for the right opportunity to strike," Dumbledore finally answered. "Lord Voldemort's powers are far greater now than they ever were. With the Ministry refusing to mobilise itself, I believe that he will not encounter much resistance when he finally reveals himself."

"Great," Harry muttered sourly and suddenly felt very tired. Meciél sent a blaze of Hellfire to warm his body and he could feel his eyes threatening to shut. To wake him out of this stupor, Harry jumped up to his feet and began to pace. "Look, I don't like Voldemort. Frankly, I think he's a fucking prick."

"I doubt there is a single person in the world that will disagree with you," Dumbledore said lightly, peering at Harry over his glasses as the Denarian Knight paced around his office.

"Personally, I don't like you either," Harry continued honestly and shrugged at Meciél's exasperated sigh. "Hey, I won't lie to you here. I think you're sanctimonious, self righteous and pretty much an annoying git."

"Coming from you, I daresay I should take that as a compliment," Dumbledore said, not looking at all affronted at Harry's declaration.

"Look, I don't like you but I...respect...you, I guess," Harry muttered and rolled his eyes. "Don't go nuts or anything, insinuating that you're a paedophile is one of my favourite pastimes. Anyway, you told me that you were part of an Order that opposed Voldemort. Am I right?"

"I am," Dumbledore confirmed.

Harry paused and stared at Dumbledore with narrowed green eyes. After seeing nothing more than honesty and sincerity, he pressed on.

"It's obvious that Voldemort has a grudge against me," Harry continued. "Whether it's because of the whole 'can't kill a kid' thing or whether it's because I practically split him in two during the Third Task. So, I was thinking....you're against Voldemort for justice and the light and all that crap...and I'm Voldemort's enemy...and seeing that I've gone up against him twice...we could...become...allies."

"That took quite a lot of effort to say, didn't it?" Dumbledore asked after a moment's silence, looking very thoughtful as he mulled over Harry's words.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Harry exhaled loudly, glancing around Dumbledore’s office. The portraits were watching the entire proceedings silently. Harry gave them a fierce scowl, pushing down his embarrassment and turning his blunt gaze back on Dumbledore. “You don’t like him, I don’t like him- see, we already have a good working relationship. Besides, I can do all the nitty-gritty stuff that you despise so you don’t have to get your hands sullied.”

“It is an interesting proposal,” Dumbledore mused thoughtfully, absently stroking his beard. “I did not think that you would wish to join the Order of Phoenix, although, your parents were former members before their untimely deaths.”

“Whoa,” Harry said quickly, waving his hands and stopping Dumbledore in his tracks. “I said allies, not subordinates. I’d work with you, not for you. I got this thing about taking orders, you see. Meciél thinks it’s a teenage phase of mine or whatever, but whatever.”

“The best thing you could do for the Order is to focus on yourself,” Dumbledore answered after a moment’s pause. His gaze locked onto Harry and the Denarian could tell that he was utterly serious. “I have no doubt that you will become a very significant factor in the struggle against Lord Voldemort, more than you just might realise. However, all your talents and skills will be useless if you are executed by the White Council.”

‘He makes a good point,’ Meciél said. ‘I’m afraid that revenge will have to wait for now.’

Harry’s face was scrunched up in a scowl but he gave a short, grudging nod. He stopped pacing and sat back down. There was an awkward silence in Dumbledore’s office as both the Headmaster and the Denarian observed each other carefully. Finally, Dumbledore cleared his throat.

“I understand that you duelled Lord Voldemort,” he said calmly. “I am very impressed, Harry. There were only a few who could oppose him the last time around- your parents being two I can remember. Now, given his present level of power, I believe that there are only a

handful of wizards in the world who could possibly hope to match him.”

“Why does everybody have to bring up the parents?” Harry muttered to himself, before he shook his head and let out a loud derisive snort. “And look, I normally love being complimented- it does wonders for my modest ego- but save it. I’m not in the mood for praise about my ‘spectacular’ duelling skills after getting my arse handed to me twice in one night.”

“Do not be discouraged, Harry,” Dumbledore advised kindly. “You are young and relatively unskilled compared to Lord Voldemort, yet you stand here before me, alive and well. Given time, you will find a way to conquer him. I guarantee it.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Harry asked, staring at Dumbledore strangely. The old man merely shook his head, his light blue eyes twinkling with a trove of hidden secrets, and changed the subject.

“Now, I believe it is time you got some rest,” Dumbledore said cheerfully and abruptly stood up. His purple robes glittered under the flickering flames of the fireplace and he swung his hands forward to let out a loud clap.

There was a soft pop and a small, green creature dressed in a clean tea-towel appeared in the office. Harry recognised the thing as a house-elf as it bowed to Dumbledore, addressing the wizard with a squeaky voice.

“What can Izzy be doing for Master Dumbledore?” it asked.

“Could you please take Harry to one of the private rooms, please?” Dumbledore asked it pleasantly and the house-elf bowed again. Dumbledore turned back to Harry. “For now, I believe you deserve some privacy to rest, so we shall not bother the Gryffindor Dormitory at this time. Tomorrow, you will be expected to attend all of your classes- I will enrol you into the same subjects as you attended last year. Also, expect to receive a small package from me in the next few

days. I have a few books of a rather...questionable nature...that you might find quite interesting.”

“What?” Harry asked with a confused shake of his head.

“Go and get some sleep, Harry,” Dumbledore said and a warm smile crossed his face. “You look like you need it.”

‘Did he just imply that I was ugly?’ Harry mentally wandered as he followed the creature out of Dumbledore’s office, leaving behind the cosy, warm chair and the twinkling-eyes of the Headmaster.

‘You are far too tired to be making witty remarks, beloved,’ Meciél said soothingly. ‘Get some rest. We face a tough challenge tomorrow.’

‘How so?’

‘Why, we must struggle through a single day of idiots and pathetic weaklings without cursing them, of course,’ Meciél said. ‘This Umbridge does sound interesting, though. I am looking forward to meeting her. She sounds most...pleasant.’

‘Why do I get the feeling that I’ll be killing her before the end of the school year?’ Harry sighed.

‘I have no idea, beloved,’ Meciél said innocently. ‘I have no idea.’

A/N: The normal Harry Potter had a bit of trouble controlling his temper. The Denarian Harry Potter has a lot of trouble controlling his temper. You shall see. A lot of reviewers have complained that Harry is immature and childish. Good, that's exactly the angle I was going for. I want my story to be original and I've never seen it done like this before in a story that wasn't a parody. Still, Harry will mature...slowly...over this book, and he is capable of acting rationally at times.

The next morning saw the Great Hall filled with the loud buzz of casual conversation. A high-pitched and quite annoying laugh cackled from the Hufflepuff table from one of the third years as her classmate snorted Pumpkin juice from his nose. One end of the Ravenclaw table seemed to be involved in a rabid debate, their faces red with annoyance and even anger as they argued animatedly over some arcane topic. Still, at one point or another every single student's eyes had rested on the large wooden doors that signified the entrance of the Great Hall, all wondering whether the newest arrival to the Hogwarts student body would be coming down for breakfast.

Dumbledore had given them a quick speech, asking them to respect Harry's privacy and cautioning them to give him a wide berth if necessary. The entire school had been witness to the spectacle last night and the rumours were already making their way through the entire school. From a secret society of knights, to a group of dark wizards, to Death Eaters, to muggle mobsters, and a conspiracy amongst the Hit Wizards of Germany, everybody knew that Harry was in some sort of trouble. The younger years, especially some of the females, talked about it with wistful tones, while the older years who had gotten to know Harry last time made a mental note to stay out of the bad tempered wizard's way. They remembered his scathing tongue quite well.

There was a sudden hush and the entire hall, Professors and all, glanced up as a new arrival entered the hall, wearing robes bearing the Gryffindor House crest and an awkward scowl on his face.

When Harry had woken up, feeling quite refreshed and released, he had been surprised to see a heap of clothing and books lying at the

end of his bed. Shuddering at the thought of Dumbledore coming in to watch him sleep, Harry had reluctantly changed out of his clothes and put on the robes. To his surprise, they were quite comfortable- even if he did look like an idiot. He had briefly scanned the books, noting that most of them bore names such as 'The Standard Book of Spells: Grade Five' and 'Defensive Magical Theory' – the latter sounding quite interesting. There were, however, a few unnamed books with dusty covers and cracked spines. Harry had a brief glance at them and saw that they delved into some of the more forbidden areas of magic, including the casting of powerful, dark magic.

"Dumbledore, you old sleaze," Harry had muttered appreciatively. "And here I was thinking that you were innocent."

'Beware, beloved,' Meciél had warned. 'If Dumbledore wants you to grow in power then there must be a very good reason for it.'

"I know, I know," Harry had finished with a sigh.

He had shoved all of his books into a small bag and, with the help of Meciél, had lightened and reduced it to the point where it was like carrying a bulging wallet. Afterwards, he had felt his stomach growling with hunger and, with a sigh, had braced himself and walked down to the Great Hall.

And there he was, standing in the middle of the doorway with all of Hogwarts staring at him.

Harry scowled, his eyes glinting angrily, and many students quickly turned away, avoiding eye contact and resuming their conversations with louder-than-necessary voices. Ignoring the stares, Harry strode over to the Gryffindor table and sat down with a sigh.

From across the table, a tall, gangly red-head with brown eyes, rather big ears and a startled expression on his face blinked.

"Hi," Ron said awkwardly, staring Harry up and down. There was a tense silence as Harry clenched his fist, but restrained himself. "Um...I've never seen you in robes before?"

Harry looked up, scowling so hard that Ron blanched. The tips of his ears flamed red as his cheeks paled and he glanced away, apparently seeking courage from a pudgy boy Harry remembered as Neville.

"What was that about yesterday?" Neville spoke up bravely and a silence descended upon that quarter of the Gryffindor table.

"Yeah, they looked like they wanted to skewer you," Ron added in helpfully.

"Shut up," Harry snapped testily, his eyes burrowing into Ron's with a angry glint.

'Temper, beloved,' Meciell cautioned.

Ron sighed at Harry's anger and dropped the subject. Harry ignored the looks that Neville and Ron exchanged and the whispers starting to pop up all over the hall and dug into a plate of steaming bacon and toast. His anger was still burning within him and it took a lot of effort to restrain his tongue and his temper.

A few moments later, Harry heard the soft footsteps of somebody approaching him from behind. He glanced over his shoulder and almost sighed as he saw McGonagall approach him with a stern expression on her face.

"Mr Potter, this is your schedule," she greeted him stiffly. Harry took the piece of parchment from her with a grunt of acknowledgement, hoping that the greying witch would go away.

Unfortunately, she didn't.

"I understand that you are here in perilous circumstances," McGonagall said severely, although Harry could have thought her tone softened just a tad. "Nonetheless, I will not have a repeat performance of your despicable behaviour from last year. Am I clear?"

Harry scowled, an arrogant smile crossing his face, and he opened his mouth. However, a mental prod from Meciél caused him to halt whatever he was about to say.

‘Is it worth dying for?’

Harry scowled and a visible shudder ran through his body as he audibly snapped his mouth and gave a sharp nod. McGonagall looked pleased and strolled away as Harry turned back to his breakfast, digging his fork into his breakfast in a series of vicious jabbing movements.

‘Make a note,’ he said tightly.

‘I’m listening, beloved,’ Meciél said wryly, although she sounded amused.

‘Every time she does something like that, we kill a kitten.’

Meciél’s response went unheard as a furious, shrill voice erupted from in front of him. His gaze shot up and he gave a loud mental groan, much to the amusement of Meciél, as a bushy-haired girl with an immaculately polished badge pinned to her robes stood before him, her hands on her hips.

“You!” Hermione said with a furious scowl. Harry blinked at the amount of raw hatred he could see in her eyes. Sure, he had annoyed her, but he hadn’t thought he had been bad enough to warrant that. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know, the usual,” Harry said with a loud drawl and enjoyed the sight of Hermione flushing with anger. “Sitting down, eating breakfast, doing a bit of breathing as well- I like breathing.”

Hermione let out a growl- an honest to God growl- and even Harry was a little taken back.

“My, you weren’t this twitchy last year,” Harry murmured with a smirk. “Something bad must have happened...and you think I was involved

some way. Hmm...you weren't raped, were you? I hear that makes women go and do all sorts of crazy shit..."

"How dare you!" Hermione snapped and her hand plunged into her robes, presumably for her wand. Harry was faster and his wand was in his hand in an instant, his eyes narrowed yet surprise showing on his face.

Suddenly there was a calming hand on Hermione's shoulder and another girl appeared. Harry spotted long blonde hair, sparkling grey eyes and the features of a family that he very much detested, and he groaned loudly.

Amanda raised her eyebrows but looked amused at Harry's reaction as she gently led Hermione to a seat, whispering soothing words into her ears and calming the bushy-haired girl down. Harry idly noted that both girls had grown up a little, filling out in some of the best places and retreating in some of the worst. After Amanda was done with Hermione, she strode back to Harry and sat down next to him. Much to his disgust, she gave him a hug.

"Nice to see you too, Harry," she said cheerfully, patting Harry on the back. Harry had stiffened and was gritting his teeth, his eyes flashing with anger.

Amanda must have sensed his tenseness because she abruptly backed away, looking awkward. Harry ignored her and turned back to his food with a roll of his eyes.

"What are you even doing here?" Harry muttered sourly, poking at his food with his fork. "Shouldn't you be...somewhere else...that's not here?"

"Well, I liked Hogwarts so much that I decided to transfer here," Amanda said loudly. Her eyes darted back and forth and she leant in closer to Harry, lowering her voice. "And Dad thought I should stay away from home for a while, you know, just in case."

"Great," Harry muttered under his breath. "Just fucking great."

Hermione was staring at Amanda with death in her eyes, looking furious as the blonde girl chatted to Harry. Harry noticed the bushy-haired girl's glare from the corner of his eye and frowned.

"Okay, what's with frizz-bot over there?" He asked, jerking his thumb at Hermione when the other girl had looked away. "Sure, I daydreamed of hexing her into a pile of sludge but I don't remember doing it."

"Krum," was all Amanda said, looking bleak.

Harry blinked at the mention of the dead Durmstrang champion. He hadn't really thought about him at all but he vaguely recalled Hermione going to the Yule Ball as Krum's partner.

'She blames you for his death,' Meciél noted shrewdly. 'This may get interesting.'

"So, that was a nice entrance yesterday," Amanda said after a moment's pause, and she gave him a wry smile. "It was a bit extreme, though, and I never thought I'd see you down on your knees."

"Okay, that's it," Harry said sharply as his temper flared. He slammed his hand down on the table, causing the dishes to rattle and a large portion of the Gryffindor table to stare at him. "The next person to mention anything about last night, and I mean anything, will find my wand so far up their arse that curses will fly from their nose. Got it?"

'Your temper, beloved,' Meciél warned with a sharp note in her voice.

Amanda rolled her eyes but nodded her head, along with many of the other Gryffindors that Harry directed his glare at. After a few moments, after Harry had cut and mangled a piece of bacon into ground meat, she spoke up.

"A bit embarrassing, was it?" She asked sympathetically.

Harry looked at her stonily until she paled and raised her hands in a placating manner.

“Okay,” she said quickly. “I get it.”

Harry grunted.

“So,” Amanda said slowly, changing the subject, and she stared at Harry with curious grey eyes. “I heard you worked with my father a while back. Joined the good side, I see.”

“No,” Harry drawled. “I joined the money side. Quite a lot of it, too.”

“Was it a dangerous job?” Amanda asked carefully and Harry snorted, dismissing Amanda’s trepidation with a wave of his hand.

“Vampires are weak,” he said arrogantly. “All they have is numbers and once you box them in, any two-bit wizard can kick their arse.”

“Vampires?” Ron said in disbelief, blinking in surprise from across the table. “You’re fighting vampires?”

“No, I’m killing vampires,” Harry said and gave a cold smile. There was a disturbing glint in his emerald eyes as he continued. “There’s a difference between a fight and a slaughter, ginger.”

“Ginger?” Ron mouthed to Neville, who shrugged.

“What type?” Hermione asked stiffly from down the table. It seemed as if her hatred was only surpassed by one thing- her curiosity.

“Red Court,” Harry said shortly with a frown. There was a moment of silence at the part of the table, the laughter and chatter from the other tables drifting over in a buzz of noise.

“So, what else have you been up to?” Amanda asked after a few moments, looking as if she wanted to fill in the silence.

“Actually, I’ve taken up photography,” Harry answered earnestly, trying his best to look convincing.

“Really?” Amanda exclaimed in surprise, looking amused.

“Well, no, not really,” Harry admitted, and then he frowned. “Unless taking nude photos of your Mum in the shower while I’m hiding behind the bathroom curtains counts as photography.”

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Amanda said wryly, although she didn’t sound surprised at all.

“Don’t sound too disappointed,” Harry said flatly, just as a loud gong echoed through the Great Hall. Students began to stand up from their tables, grabbing their books and heading off for their first classes.

Amanda sighed and withdrew a piece of parchment from her Hogwarts robes. She studied it and groaned.

“Well, I have to go,” she said glumly. “I have Potions.”

“Good luck with that,” Harry muttered sarcastically, taking his time to finish the remains of his porridge. As Amanda, Ron, Neville and Hermione left the table with the other Hogwarts students, Meciél let out a pointed cough.

‘Beloved...’ she started.

“How can you cough?” Harry interrupted. “You have no lungs?”

‘You might want to look down at your timetable.’

Harry frowned and glanced at his schedule. He sighed after seeing his first class and rolled his eyes.

“Oh, great,” he muttered sourly. “Potions.”

‘Aren’t you lucky,’ Meciél murmured. ‘Remember; try to keep your temper at bay. I don’t particularly want you to die.’

“Oh, I’m going to have fun here,” Harry mumbled sarcastically under his breath.

“Well, well, well,” Snape drawled slowly, his dark eyes centred on one figure sitting in his dark, damp potions classroom. “The prodigal son returns. Do not expect any leeway due to your absence, Potter. You

have been enrolled in the Fifth Year Potions course and you will be expected to perform to the necessary standards.”

‘Prodigal son...oh, he’s funny,’ Harry thought sarcastically as he glared at the pale skinned man. From what he could remember, Snape hadn’t changed a single bit. He still had sallow skin, he still had a crooked nose and he still wore a perpetual scowl on his face- probably set there for life because of the oily substance that coated his hair.

‘I do not believe he is aware of your true state, beloved,’ Meciél murmured.

Harry must have made an expression of distaste because a wicked sneer grew on Snape’s face and obsidian eyes glittered with satisfaction.

“That will be five points from Gryffindor,” he said silkily. “Do not make those faces in my classroom again, Potter.”

Harry’s eyes flared with dark power and he had to bite his tongue as a retort died on his lips. Snape’s smile dimmed and his cheeks paled after seeing a flash of fire in Harry’s eyes, most likely remembering the last time Harry’s eyes had looked like that. Although Snape towered over Harry, the Professor refused to meet the Denarian’s eyes. The class watched the interaction as Snape fell silent baited breath- it appeared as if Snape wasn’t the only one who remembered the incident last year- but Snape’s recovery was smoothed and practised, and Harry almost thought he had imagined it.

“That will be another five points from Gryffindor,” Snape said softly. “Now remove that defiant smirk from your face. I will not tolerate the same type of behaviour I received from you last year. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes,” Harry answered coldly, but forcing as much politeness as he could into his voice.

“Yes, Professor,” Snape said with an amused smirk and Harry twitched, working his jaw around something and glaring at the greasy patch of hair on Snape’s head as if he wanted it to explode into a burst of flames,

“Yes, Professor,” Harry added icily, his eyes glinting with anger. However, a sudden chill blasted his mind and it was as if his head had been dunked in icy-cold water. His anger evaporated and he shivered with a pained expression on his face.

‘Was that necessary?’ Harry murmured angrily.

‘Be careful, beloved,’ was all Meciél said.

“That’s another five points for your disrespectful tone,” Snape added, and he looked like he was enjoying himself. There were several sniggers from the other side of the classroom and Harry’s eyes flickered over them, noting that they were all Slytherins. “You have to speak to me in a respectful manner, Potter. I am your Professor and you will treat me as such.”

A thousand different retorts came to his mind but mindful of Meciél’s warning, Harry clamped down on his tongue, despite the irritation and anger brewing in his veins. His eyes glittered furiously but Meciél’s ‘dunked’ him in icy-cold water once more, her voice stern and commanding.

‘You need to calm down,’ she ordered. ‘You cannot afford to attract the attention of this ‘Umbridge’ and give her any reason to laud for your expulsion!’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Harry mentally sighed, his stubbornness trying to rear its head. ‘But I don’t do respectful that well.’

With an almost unnoticeable growl, directed at both Snape and Meciél- although Amanda, who was sitting a few seats away, looked quite startled at the noise- Harry closed lowered his gaze to his desk, trying to remove the target of his fury. Snape looked extraordinarily pleased with himself at Harry’s apparent submission and turned back to the rest of the class.

"We will be continuing on the forth stage of our potions," he said softly. Harry glanced around, seeing simmering cauldrons in front of all the other students. "I expect you all to remember that the gillyweed goes in after you stir the potion clockwise- clockwise, Longbottom, not anti-clockwise. Enlighten the class as to why we don't stir it anti-clockwise."

Neville, who was sitting in between Ron and Hermione, flushed with embarrassment and lowered his gaze.

"Because it explodes, sir," the timid Gryffindor answered meekly.

"Very good, Longbottom," Snape said with a sneer. "That will be one point to Gryffindor...for your excellent memory of the last week's lesson."

Neville flushed amongst the jeers of the silver and green robed students and Harry saw a familiar pale face pointing at Neville and making a not-so-subtle motion of a cauldron exploding in his face. Despite his hatred towards the man, Harry had to suppress a snort at the pudgy boy's humiliation- something that Snape picked up on and he whirled around in a swirl of fluttering robes.

"Is something funny, Potter?" Snape all but snarled and Harry blinked in surprise, trying to smooth over his expression.

"No," the Denarian said distantly, his tone polite but his eyes distant.

"No, Professor," Snape reminded coldly and Harry clenched his fists and levelled Snape an icy glare, fire brewing in his eyes. "And I want your mind on the here and now, Potter. If you blow up a cauldron, you can look forward to cleaning the mess up- without magic!"

Harry rolled his eyes but centred himself on the room, much to Snape's pleasure, whose smirk only grew wider and wider by Harry's apparently meekness.

'This guy is really starting to piss me off,' Harry thought exasperatedly. 'Can't I...?'

'No,' Meciél interrupted.

'But...'

'No,' Meciél said again, although he could feel both her sympathy- and her amusement- at his situation.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your attitude problem, Potter," Snape growled malicious, a smile of dark amusement stretching his features. "And let's make it another five for that glare. Remove it from your face at once."

Harry, in a mixture of effort and Meciél's help, smoothed over his face until it was devoid of emotion. Snape blinked at the change but smiled as the Slytherins sniggered again. Harry noticed that Malfoy was particular enjoying the show and hatred flashed through his mind.

"Well, it looks like I was wrong," Snape said coldly, looking amused as he gazed at Harry. "Perhaps it is not so hard to beat something into that swelled-up head of yours after all. Actually, it's really quite pathetic at how you are so easily cowed..."

'Pathetic?' Harry thought dangerously.

'Beloved!' Meciél warned quickly.

"I was lying before, you know," Harry said loudly and the class was silent as Snape paused, scowling at Harry with narrowed eyes. Before he could say anything, Harry plunged on with an arrogant sneer on his face. "I just loved the way you bullied Longbottom over there- and what a name! I bet you've had a lot of fun with that as well."

'Stop it!' Meciél hissed, but Harry had only just started.

"Seriously, Professor Snape, the whole 'One point for memory' was just great," he continued earnestly. "Not only was it insulting, but you did it with subtlety. I can never do that because I usually blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. Like, if I wanted to insult Manfolk or

Milfoy over there, I'd say "you're a complete fucking retard who has sex with pigs." Then, I'd say "I don't like you and I hope you get cancer," and I'd probably finish it off with "you're adopted and nobody loves you," just to get the point across."

"Do you think you're funny, Potter?" Snape hissed. He looked both undeniably furious and immensely pleased with himself as he rounded into Harry.

"No, I think I'm hysterical," Harry snorted and dismissed Snape's comment with a wave of his hand- something that made the Professor let out a audible hiss of anger. "But after all, Professor Snape, I am a hero, and heroes always have a great sense of humour. Wouldn't you agree, Professor?"

Snape's face was losing its colour and Harry noticed a flash of long-buried hatred rising in the Potions Professor's eyes. A part of him was puzzled at that- was Snape still nursing a sore ego over last year- but the rest of him was watching the reaction with an arrogant smirk on his face, almost daring Snape to respond.

"Hero, Potter?" Snape said coldly. "You think you're a hero?"

"Didn't we go through this last year...Severus, was it?" Harry said, almost kindly. "I don't think I'm a hero. I know I'm a hero. I have duelled Voldemort twice now, well, three times including the thing when I was a baby, and I've come out pretty well each time."

"Potter..."

"Look, how about I write down some tips for you?" Harry said patronisingly, shaking his head with a good natured sigh. "Don't worry, Professor, I'm sure we can make a proper wizard out of you yet."

'You are an idiot!' Meciél sighed.

'Ah, even I could it was happening no matter what I did,' Harry thought dismissively.

Suddenly, just as Snape opened his mouth with a furious scowl on his face, a pile of slimy, green stuff shot up from one of the Slytherin's desks and shot into his open mouth. The Slytherins gasped, some of the Gryffindors giggled and Harry blinked in surprise as Snape gagged, desperately waving his wand and jabbing it at his throat. There was a loud squelching noise and suddenly a green slimy blur shot out of Snape's mouth with great force, striking the roof with a loud splat and clinging to the dusty rafters.

Large strings of saliva and spittle dribbled down Snape's mouth, some still connected to the slimy pile of goo stuck to the roof, and his sallow face had gone the colour of sour milk, his hands shaking with rage. His yellow, uneven teeth were bared in a furious glare and his eyes were flashing murderously. There was silence in the classroom, complete and utter silence

"Hey, don't look at me," Harry protested when Snape's eyes came on him.

Snape was quivering- actually quivering- with rage, his mouth opening and closing wordlessly. His eyes were literally bulging in his sockets and thick purple veins were emerging from the sallow surface of his skin. All in all, Harry thought the man was about to have an aneurism.

It was hysterical.

"That's....that's..." Snape started, his voice low, cold, dangerous. "Fifty...One hundred and fifty...points from Gryffindor...Potter, how dare you...."

"Eh, that's cool," Harry said dismissively, although the other Gryffindors in the class looked aghast and were glaring at Harry furiously- all except Amanda, who looked as if she didn't know if she wanted to laugh or scold him.

Harry's comment broke Snape out of his stupor.

"Two weeks detention," Snape roared loudly, his booming in the cavernous dungeons.

"Hey, I didn't do it," Harry protested. "I know I say a lot of crap, but seriously, I didn't do it. You know me, usually I'd take the credit for it even if I hadn't thrown a pile of green crap into your mouth."

"Make that a month!" Snape hissed coldly. "And close your mouth before you get into anymore trouble!"

"I got a good one," Harry said with a bright smile and although his anger was brewing, there was a certain satisfaction racing through his mind at the sight of Snape raging before him. "How about...no?"

"How about expulsion?" Snape hissed and his eyes gleamed with a deadly light. "Of course, then we'd have to call in those friends of yours to come and pick you up. I'm sure that would be an eventful day for all of us."

Harry stiffened and hatred flashed in his eyes as he glared at Snape. As if he was suddenly remembering his circumstances, he said nothing but clenched his fingers as his furious gaze bore into Snape's head. Snape stared back, still refusing to meet his eyes, but the hatred between the two was undeniable.

The class, silent spectators in the altercation, was watching Harry and Snape with bated breath. Finally, after a full minute, Harry heaved an angry sigh and abruptly looked away, backing down. Snape looked satisfied- as well as furious- as Harry made a sour face and kept his head down for the rest of the lesson.

'There are times when I can empathise with the Fallen who completely subjugate their hosts! Meciél hissed as Harry strode from the Potions classroom sporting a furious expression, his books tucked under one arm. 'Did you ignore everything I said?'

'Come on,' Harry protested angrily. 'He baited me!'

'So I noticed,' Meciél said dryly, although some of her anger did drain away after that. 'Still, beloved, you need to start controlling your temper a little better. There will be people who will try to get a rise out

of you and there will be times- such as these- when you must refrain from acting out in anger.'

'All I did was say a few things,' Harry mentally grumbled as he left the dungeons. The scowl on his face was enough to deter any potential conversationalist as he stalked past students and classrooms. 'What the hell was Snape playing at? You think Dumbledore could have at least told them to leave me alone.'

'I have the feeling that the man has a grudge against you,' Meciél mused thoughtfully. 'Something that goes past the one year you have known him.'

'You don't say?' Harry thought sarcastically as he rounded a corner.

'Now hurry, you have Defence against the Dark Arts,' Meciél said and paused. 'If you feel there is a time when you cannot keep yourself silent, tell me and I will take over.'

'I can keep myself silent,' Harry thought grouchy as he glanced down at his timetable, looking for the classroom he was supposed to head towards.

'You better,' Meciél said forebodingly and Harry blinked as a certain section of the timetable shimmered under his eyes. 'It says here that the Professor is named 'Umbridge'. Lets see if you are capable of making a good impression- although, I doubt it.'

"That wasn't the best thing to do," was the first thing Amanda said when she caught up to Harry. Harry turned his incredulous gaze at the long-maned blonde beside him and groaned in exasperation.

"What, you're going to give me a lecture too?" He said sourly. "And I didn't do anything- except to insult him, and really, the son-of-a-bitch deserved it. 'Pathetic' my arse...I'll show him pathetic when I use his face as a mop!"

"Snape hates Gryffindors, and he probably hasn't forgotten what you did to him last year," Amanda continued exasperatedly. "We've just lost over one-hundred and fifty points."

"Yeah, tell me something I hadn't already figured out," Harry muttered sourly as the two Gryffindors both turned a corner.

"We've got Umbridge next and she's a complete bitch," Amanda said flatly and Harry blinked.

"Whoa," he said, staring at Amanda strangely. "That was....new."

"Seriously, she is," Amanda complained, looking annoyed. "All she does is to tell us to read out of the book. We'll never pass our OWLs like that."

"Wait, no spell-work?" Harry interrupted and Amanda nodded grimly. Harry made a face and rolled his eyes. "Great," he said brightly. "There goes my favourite class in this dump."

Harry and Amanda strode to the Defence against the Dark Arts classroom in the closest thing to a comfortable silence Harry had achieved ever since the duel with Voldemort a couple of days ago. Amanda had a soft smile on her face while Harry just looked grouchy.

As Harry and Amanda entered the classroom, Amanda whipped her head around and gave Hermione and Ron a bright smile. Much to the annoyance of Harry, her hair- longer than he recalled, flew into his mouth and he spat it out. Amanda made a face and cleaned Harry's spittle off with a wave of her wand, while Harry made loud gagging noises. Suddenly, he stopped and eyed Amanda with a lecherous grin.

"Is that...mango?" He asked with a small devious smile as he took a seat. "Do you use mango-scented shampoo?"

"What's wrong with that?" Amanda asked defensively, although her cheeks were heating up as she sat down next to Harry, and she refused to look at him in the eye.

"Nothing's wrong with that," Harry said with a little smile. He looked away and paused as Amanda gaze at him heatedly. "Except for the fact that you're blushing, which means you think something's wrong with it."

"I don't think anything's wrong with it," Amanda said with a scowl, her cheeks red, and quickly glancing around the classroom. "It's perfectly normal."

"Then why blush?" Harry asked with a cocky grin. Amanda's response was interrupted as the door to the classroom opened and in walked Professor Umbridge and Harry's first thought was 'what the hell was with all the pink?'

Professor Umbridge was a short, stout woman with short, curly, mousy-brown hair, which had been pinned back with a bright pink Alice band that was covered with pink flowers. She wore a pink fluffy cardigan under her robes and wore a simpering smile on her pallid, toad-like face. She was one of the ugliest things Harry had ever seen, and he had summoned demons from the very depths of hell.

"Good morning, class," Umbridge simpered sweetly, a slack smile on her face. Her eyes, however, remained beady and cold.

Much to Harry's astonishment, the class responded.

"Good morning, Professor Umbridge," They chorused loudly. Harry had remained silent but he couldn't help himself and let out a soft snort. It was the most ridiculous thing he had heard all day.

"Excuse me....ah, Mr Potter," Umbridge said slowly, and her eyes did not match the sugary smile that the witch wore on her face. "Is something the matter?"

'You want to see me make a good impression?' Harry said with a mental grin.

'I'm watching,' Meciél said doubtfully.

Harry allowed a slack smile of his own to cross his face and suddenly his expression was just as pleasant- and contrived- as Umbridge's, who stared back at him with a faint glint of surprise in her eyes.

“Nothing’s wrong, Professor,” Harry responded, just as sweetly, and the class stared at him in bafflement. “My throat’s a little hoarse, we just had potions, you see, and the fumes were just horrible today.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve heard all about your potions,” Umbridge said and made a disappointed tsking noise, shaking her head. “I’ve arranged it so that you’ll be serving those detentions with me, Mr Potter. Perhaps this will give us the chance to have a nice, little chat.”

“Oh, but Professor Snape assigned them to me and I wouldn’t want to impose on your valuable time,” Harry replied earnestly, his eyes wide with exaggerated innocence and selflessness. “I’m sure you have much better things than look after a naughty child.”

“Mr Potter, I am the Professor here,” Umbridge said sweetly, but an undercurrent of steel had appeared in her voice and her eyes flickered with irritation. “And students should not talk back to their esteemed Professors.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, Professor Umbridge,” Harry said sincerely and straightened his back. He folded his hands on his desk and gave Umbridge nothing short of what appeared to be his full attention, matching her expression with a winning smile.

“I accept your apology, Mr Potter,” Umbridge said after a moments pause, and she smiled sweetly and turned back to the rest of the class. “Now children, put your wands away and take out your textbook. We’re going to be reading through Chapter Nine today.”

Harry noticed that nobody had even placed their wands on their desks and that the textbooks were already open on everybody’s table. Ignoring the lingering stares he was receiving from some people, Harry promptly opened up his own textbook and began to read.

‘That was a nice performance,’ Meciél said in amusement. Harry could feel her literally memorising entire pages of the textbook as he turned the page every couple of seconds, not even paying attention to the words. ‘A bit sugary for my tastes, I’ll admit, but still wonderfully performed’

'I feel like my sugary sweetness is about to burst out of my arse,' Harry mentally grumbled, but his face remained the same, deeply attentive as he 'read' the book below him.

Meciel paused and Harry felt her looking through his senses, taking in Umbridge and assessing the other women carefully. After a while, she murmured 'She's dangerous, beloved,' into his ear, and Harry had to stop an incredulous snort from escaping his mouth.

'I could squash her in an instant,' He thought viciously. 'In fact, I know exactly how I would do it too...'

'She's dangerous because she believes she is in the right,' Meciel said and there was a dark tone in her voice. 'And people who believe they are doing the right thing are the most dangerous of all, no matter what side they are on. Remember that.'

"Harry!" Somebody hissed from next to him and Harry looked up to see Amanda eying him with nothing short of outrage. "Are you sucking up to her?"

"I was being sarcastic, you dolt!" Harry hissed back, his eyes still on the textbook. There was a sudden noise from the front of the room and Harry looked up to see Umbridge staring right at him, satisfaction on her face.

"Is there a problem, Mr Potter?" Umbridge called out sweetly. Harry kept his head down and rolled his eyes, but adopted his earnest and humble persona and glanced up with a puzzled and polite smile.

"No, Professor," he said sincerely with a sweet smile. "I have finished reading chapter nine though."

"I find that very hard to believe," Umbridge said a tap sharply. She stood up and walked across the room towards Harry. Harry glanced up at her, his expression not changing an instant as she bent over his desk and regarded his book. "You're not telling lies, are you Mr Potter? I detest naughty children who tell lies."

“No, Professor,” Harry said and he sounded scandalised as his eyes widened with apparent horror at the mere suggestion. He gestured to his head and put a solemn expression on his face. “I have a photographic memory, so everything I read sticks. It’s quite easy for me to go through a book very quickly.

“I see,” Umbridge said sweetly and Harry got the impression that she didn’t believe him. Her cold, beady eyes regarded him carefully. “What did you think of Slinkhard’s theory of the five most common defensive situations a wizard might find himself in?”

“Oh, they were fascinating,” Harry said quickly, nodding enthusiastically. His eyes went blank for an instant as an image of the relevant page sprung to his mind. After a few seconds, while Umbridge waited impatiently, Harry continued “I think that he made some good points about disappearing if the situation looks dangerous. There are some parts where I think he could have gone into with a little more detail...”

“No, no, no,” Umbridge interrupted sweetly, shaking her head. Her eyes glinted as she continued. “It is not up to children to question a Ministry-Licensed Educator. I’m afraid I’m going to have to take five points from Gryffindor for your impetuosity, Mr Potter.”

“Oh, I understand Professor,” Harry said sweetly, but his eyes were glinting with sudden anger and the words were out of his mouth before he knew it. “We should never let a little thing like the truth get in the way of Ministry edict. It would be bad for business, wouldn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” Umbridge said, her smile vanishing as her eyes narrowed. “The Ministry of Magic knows truth from lie, Mr Potter, no matter what...strange rumours you may have heard.” Her warning given, her smile suddenly switched back on. “Or did you mean something else, child?”

‘Oh, so close,’ Meciell said, partly in amusement.

‘It’s not over yet,’ Harry thought.

“What I meant was that one wizard’s truth is another wizard’s lie,” Harry said quickly. He planted a sincere smile on his face when Umbridge’s looked uncertain. “The Ministry needs to determine what the truth is otherwise, well, it would be madness. Very responsible of them, don’t you agree?”

‘And that’s a save!’ Harry crowed victoriously and felt Meciél laugh. ‘I’d like to thank the academy for this award, and my manager, Meciél, for all her help and myself, for just being that awesome...’

“Quite,” Umbridge said slowly. With one last sickeningly sweet smile, she turned on her heel and strode back to her desk. The moment she had taken her eyes off Harry, his face had almost instantly twisted up into a look of revulsion and he ducked his gaze back to his book.

“I’m going enjoy killing this fuck-wit,” Harry mumbled under his breath, a cold smile twisting his lips. Next to him, Amanda started and stared at him with wide grey eyes, while Umbridge suddenly spun around, looking annoyed.

“Did you just speak again, Mr Potter?”

“I was merely talking to myself, Professor,” Harry responded, his face wearing an innocent little smile as he looked up. He gestured to his book. “I’m going to enjoy reading ahead and with any luck, be done with it.”

Umbridge gave him as sweet smile that showed that she didn’t believe him for one bit. Nonetheless, she made no more comments and turned away as Harry buried his head into the book, irritation and the cold desire to take somebody’s life flittered through his veins.

‘Ooh, we so have to kill her,’ he thought. Hellfire flashed in his mind as a dozen different scenarios crossed his mind. ‘We should make it painful, too. She’s got one of those voices that just screech in your ears.’

‘She is an odd woman,’ Meciél agreed and Harry could feel her considering the options. ‘You handled her well. I do not think lashing

out at her would have been a good idea, although you were quite obviously being insincere.'

'You don't think she bought it?' Harry questioned.

'Hardly,' Meciél said dryly. 'You have much to learn, beloved, of the art of subtlety.'

'I don't like subtlety,' Harry muttered in his mind, absently flicking the page again. 'It gets in the way of me blowing stuff up. Hell, I don't like her either. Do me a favour and put 'subtlety' and 'Umbridge' on the list.'

'List?'

'Yeah,' Harry thought smugly. 'I'm going to make a list of everybody in need of a good arse-kicking by the end of the year. I've got Snape, Hermione and maybe Fawkes on it so far.'

'I'll just get started on it then, shall I?' Meciél remarked but Harry felt her amusement spreading through him like a warm glow.

He looked up to check on Umbridge and after seeing sitting behind her desk, made to lower his head. However, Amanda caught his eyes from next to him and he cocked his head, staring at her strangely. She was eying him with a scowl on her face, probably because of his attitude towards Umbridge.

'Meciél,' Harry murmured into his mind as he stared at the blonde-haired girl, who had rolled her eyes and turned back to her book.

'Yes, beloved?'

'Add the brat.'

'With pleasure.'

A/N: This chapter was inspired by the dozens of Umbridge-gets-arrested-for-'blood' quill scenes that I've scene. I've always thought that she wouldn't risk her position so lightly. Oh, and for the record, the term 'blood quill' is actually a fanon invention- so, not from JKR. Therefore, I decided to call it something that sounds a little better. Cheers to the great many people at DLP who helped me with this chapter- especially Lucullus and Warlocke for their rather...amusing, at times, grammar check

Later that night, Harry found himself sitting in one of the comfortable chairs surrounding the Gryffindor Common Room fireplace. The warm, crackling flames heated his body and made him feel extremely cosy, his eyes fluttering shut as Meciell soothed his body with her marvellous control over his nervous system. To him, it was as if he were getting a massage. The other students in the common room were chatting away casually, Harry's presence intriguing but not so intriguing that he garnered all of their attention.

All in all, it was shaping to be a good night...which was why Harry had such a furious glint in his eyes when they snapped open and he stood up. He stretched his arms, giving a loud yawn, and scratched his nose. Ignoring any weird looks he received, Harry made sure he had his wand in his robe before strolling for the portrait entrance. After all, it wasn't the wisest thing to go to a detention with Umbridge without his wand.

"Harry, wait!" Somebody called out behind him and Harry sighed, whirling around with an annoyed frown on his face.

Amanda brushed off his frown with practiced ease as she approached him, looking a little uncertain and, dare he say, timid? She absently brushed her hair from the front of her face and met his gaze with her warm grey eyes.

"Listen, do you remember last year...how you coached me with some spells?" She asked quietly.

"Faintly," Harry replied. "I remember trying to drill some survival skills into your head. There's also the more pleasant memory of me wiping the floor with you every time we practised."

"Can you help me this year as well?" Amanda pressed and glanced over her shoulder uncertainly. "I...um...it needs to be spells that I could pass on to others...without, you know, being accused of dark magic. Do you catch my drift?"

Harry spotted Ron and Neville over Amanda's shoulders, both eying the proceedings her furtive, secretive glances. Harry narrowed his eyes and switched back to Amanda, who was fidgeting on her feet.

"Them too?" Harry asked with raised eyebrows. A scowl was already starting to form on his face. "I don't think so, brat. Trying to drill the basics of a spell into your thick head is hard enough, especially since you're blonde and, well, you guys are all stupid."

"It's just me," Amanda said hurriedly. She gestured over her shoulder and bit her lip. "There are a few of us, actually. Most of them just don't want to fail their OWLs. There are a few who believe Dumbledore and want to be prepared, and since my Dad was there and I know that he's back..."

Harry sighed.

'Meciel?' he asked.

'The more people who have the skills to fight against Lord Voldemort and his army, the better,' Meciel said thoughtfully. 'I don't see the harm. Besides, the girl has some talent and is obviously infatuated with you in some way or another. Train her well and she could be a valuable asset.'

'Hang on, I thought you despised the brat?' Harry thought. 'In fact, I remember you telling me quite clearly that you thought she was a worthless nothing.'

'You are not the only person who can put aside their differences for the greater good,' Meciel said haughtily. 'You may need an army to

fight Lord Voldemort and all his forces, an army loyal to yourself and not the Ministry or Dumbledore.'

'I am not leading a damn army,' Harry protested quickly.

'Just say yes,' Meciél said over Harry's grumbling. 'Quickly now, she's looking impatient.'

"Sure, why not?" Harry asked after a moment's pause. Amusement lit up in his green eyes. "There's nothing funnier than knocking you on your arse anyway."

Amanda flushed but grinned. She turned her head and nodded a confirmation to the small group of fifth years. While Hermione looked displeased, Ron and Neville both looked satisfied and gave wide grins back towards Amanda.

"Thanks Harry," she said with a brilliant smile and bundled her way across the room. Harry rolled his eyes at her overly-cheery attitude and made a loud noise of disgust in the back of his throat before opening the portrait door and striding out.

"I've died and I've gone to hell," Harry muttered with wide eyes as he stared at the inside of Professor Umbridge's office.

'You'd like Hell, I think,' Meciél said dryly. 'This is far worse. This is what heaven would look like.'

"Remind me to kill something cute and fuzzy when I get out of here then," Harry scowled as he took in the rather unique decorations that Umbridge had put up.

The surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and clothes, all dyed in bright, girlish colours. Dozens of vases full of dried flowers had been placed on a dozen different doilies around the room. One of the walls now held a collection of ornamental plates, each with a horribly cute enchanted kitten that meowed pathetically, some of them hissing at Harry. The smell of the office was heavy with strong perfume, so much so that Harry's eyes began to water until Meciél blocked out his olfactory senses.

There was a door on the other side of the room, which presumably led to the bedroom, and it opened as Umbridge stepped out. Her eyes fell upon Harry and a simpering smile came over her face. Harry blinked and had to hold back a snort at the sight of her without her robes on. Her cardigan, which he had only caught glimpses before (and truthfully, he hadn't been staring too hard) had large flowery emblems and was covered in little bows, like one might find on a kitten.

"Good evening, Mr Potter," Umbridge said sweetly. She gestured to one of the large, fluffy chairs in front of her desk. "Well, sit down."

Harry took a seat, his face pleasant but his eyes cold. In turn, Umbridge's eyes were also cold but she was smiling as if she had just found a nice, juicy fly. She sat down behind her desk, still smiling oddly.

"Now, I've spoken to Professor Snape and we've both agreed that your detention will be lines," Umbridge said and Harry blinked.

"Lines?" He asked sceptically. He had trouble believing that Snape would agree to something so...mundane. Harry had the feeling that the man would enjoy seeing him on his knees and scrubbing the Entrance Hall with a toothbrush- something he remembered a pair of red-haired twin moaning about last year.

"Yes, lines," Umbridge said, a tad sharply. She motioned to the piece of blank parchment in front of him. Harry kept his pleasant smile on his face as he began to pat down his school robes- he was sure he had a quill in there somewhere.

"Oh, no, no, no," Umbridge said quickly, after seeing Harry move. She smiled again and Harry caught a flash of her anticipation- like a shark who had caught the scent of blood. She reached into her robes and produced a quill of her own. "Use this one. You don't have to worry about ink- it makes its own."

Harry took the quill, his eyes narrowing as Umbridge smiled coldly. He had a look at the quill. It was different from a normal quill,

completely black and thin, with a very sharp tip. The moment he touched it a short burst of residual dark energy shot up his arm and his posture stiffened.

‘There’s a dark spell on that quill,’ Meciell said sharply. ‘I can feel it and- beloved, hold it closer to your nose for a moment.’

Harry did as he was told and brought the quill closer to his nose. His nostrils flared as if he was trying to inhale the quill itself and a visible shudder ran through his body. There was no mistaking the smell. Amongst the pleasantly-sour odour of dark magic was blood. It was almost an intoxicating smell and Harry had to yank it away from his nose as unwanted power tingled pleasurably in his veins.

“Well, Mr Potter?” Umbridge said, noticing Harry’s pause. Her sickly smile remained on her face and she regarded Harry with something akin to dark hunger in her eyes. “Start writing ‘I must not be a naughty boy’.”

“How many lines?” Harry asked slowly, staring at the quill suspiciously. Hellfire flooded into his mind and his body was on fire, raw, dark power surging through his veins as his anger grew.

“As many as it takes to...sink it,” Umbridge said slowly, almost as if she were making a great joke of something. There was a delighted smile on her flabby face as she watched Harry intently.

Harry continued to stare at the quill. His power was raging and a large part of him wanted to pull out his wand and inflict great pain on the bitch who was, in some way or another, trying to attack him. There was no way that the quill was just used for writing things down.

“Mr Potter!” Umbridge snapped.

‘Well, you’re the one who wanted me to ‘restrain my temper’,’ Harry thought smartly. His hand had crept inside his robe and was gripping the end of his wand tightly. ‘What expert advice do you have for me now?’

‘I suggest you write a single line with it and see what happens,’ Meciél said after a pause. She sounded worried, but not overly concerned. ‘I do not sense a great deal of power in the magic embedded in the quill and I believe it is a passive spell. Writing one line will not cause you any permanent damage.’

Harry frowned but picked up the quill. His pleasant face disappeared and his face was blank, his eyes hard and burning with an inner fire. Slowly, Harry pressed the nub of the quill to the piece of parchment and started to write.

‘I must not be a...’

Suddenly he let out a loud hiss. Dark energies, so faint that only Meciél could sense them, were tingling painfully in his hand and before his eyes, words started to scratch themselves into his skin. On the parchment, the quill was running with a dark red ink- no, not ink- blood, his blood.

“What the hell...?” Harry growled softly and jumped out of his seat. He glared at the quill, and then at Umbridge, who was watching him with a delighted expression on her flabby face.

‘What the hell is that?’ Harry spat out in his mind.

‘Interesting,’ Meciél murmured.

‘It’s taking my blood, Meciél,’ Harry mentally growled and wrapped his mind with nose was overrun by the distinctive scent of sulphur and dark power coursed through his veins, making him feel more alert and alive than he had been feeling all day. ‘This bitch is not getting my blood! You know what spells people can cast at you if they have your blood!’

“Sit down, Mr Potter,” Umbridge ordered, her voice firm and baring no traces of the simpering, smiling woman from before. She gestured to the parchment, which was still streaked with his crimson blood. “You haven’t finished your lines.”

“Fuck you,” Harry snorted derisively and was pleased to see the woman flush with colour. She arose from her seat, her eyes glittering with anger, but there was a simpering, sweet smile on her face.

“What did you just say?” Umbridge asked softly.

‘Well, it appears that I win,’ Meciél said flatly, although she did not sound at all upset. She regarded Umbridge with a cold callousness that only an inhuman entity could possess.

“A bit deaf, are we?” Harry mocked and cupped one of his hands around his mouth. “I said, ‘Fuck You!’. You’re not getting my blood.”

“It’s a pity, Potter,” Umbridge said softly, making a soft tscking noise and withdrawing her wand from her pink cardigan. Her beady eyes, however, told him that she did not mean her words. “We were getting on so well before.”

“Yeah, I was faking it,” Harry snapped and paused, a sly smile coming over his face “I bet you hear that a lot.”

“Sit down, Potter,” Umbridge ordered. “And finish your lines. Otherwise, I will take fifty points from Gryffindor and give you a month’s detention!”

With slow and deliberate movements, his eyes meeting Umbridge’s, Harry held the quill up before him and snapped it. He winced as the dark spell flared for a single instant, causing a biting sensation to fly through his hand, and dropped the quill onto the ground. His eyes never left the Defence Professor as he ground the quill into the ground with his foot.

‘Beloved...’ Meciél started.

‘This bitch is not taking my blood!’

“Oh dear, Potter, you’ve gone and done it this time,” Umbridge whispered gleefully. She levelled her wand at the fireplace and suddenly green fire exploded in a burst of green flames. “Professor

Dumbledore, please come to my office. It seems as if I will have no choice but to call for the expulsion of Harry Potter.”

“Do you really think he’s going to expel me?” Harry said, rolling his eyes and staring at Umbridge with nothing short of loathing on his face. “He likes me...or, he wants to like me. He’s not going to let me get killed.”

“I will see to it that you get expelled,” Umbridge hissed, her eyes alight with fury.

“You don’t have the power,” Harry snorted.

“Not yet,”

“Never,” Harry interjected icily. He smiled, a dangerous, feral smile, and Hellfire blazed in his eyes. “Voldemort will strike eventually, probably sooner than later, and then you’ll be gone and Minister Brownie will be in deep shit. I’m hoping that the son-of-a-bitch- I mean Voldemort- kills the worthless heap of crap.”

“Minister Fudge!” Umbridge howled furiously and Harry’s eyes widened as her face went taut with rage. “He is a good man!” She hissed, stalking over towards Harry with her wand levelled at him. Harry made a move to pull out his own wand, but Meciél stopped him.

‘Not yet, beloved,’ Meciél said carefully. ‘But be wary. If she makes to cast a spell, then kill her.’

“He has worked hard to stabilise the Ministry,” Umbridge continued, her voice rising in fervent fanaticism. “He is a great man, who does not need to be pulled down with the evil, attention-seeking lies of a senile old man and a rebellious little boy! You, Potter, are nothing more than an attention-seeking,” and here she jabbed him on the chest with her wand, “rude,” another jab, “evil,” another jab, “disgrace to everything that is good and true about our community. When Cornelius is through with you, you’ll be carted off to Azkaban like the-”

Harry, who was glancing down at his chest and at Umbridge's wand with narrowed eyes, twitched every time she prodded him and finally, he snapped. An icy cold sensation rushed over his arms, suddenly making them hard to move, but Umbridge was too close and Harry too angry to care and he swung with all of his might, back-handing her square across her stout, toad-like face.

A loud crack filled the room, bare flesh striking bare flesh, and suddenly Umbridge was falling down. Her eyes, filled with disbelief and growing fury, glared at him from the ground and she levelled her wand at him, her face contorted with anger. Harry's own wand was suddenly in his hands, runes flashing with unholy light as he gathered dark power and prepared to launch a searing bolt of power at the fallen witch. Suddenly though, the fireplace flashed with green light once more and, rotating madly from the flames, Dumbledore stepped out.

His light blue gaze seemed to take the situation in all at once; Harry's stormy, fury-ridden eyes, Umbridge's half-mad gaze, the broken quill on the ground and the bloodied parchment and the wand that was levelled at Harry and held by Umbridge's quivering hand, the witch staring at Dumbledore with an almost comically-shocked face.

"D-Dumbledore," she simpered and groaned as she stood up. There was a red mark across her cheek and Harry knew from personal experience that it would leave a bruise in the morning. Under the headmaster's piercing stare, she lowered her wand, her face suddenly looking clammy.

Harry himself was struggling, beating back the almost-irresistible tide of Hellfire warping through his mind. A rush of feelings rose up within him, hatred, anger, fury, and the desire to kill, but he suppressed them with practised ease- although his wand was lowered reluctantly.

"Well, I hope I'm not interrupting anything here," Dumbledore said quietly. Without taking his eyes off Umbridge, he motioned for Harry to leave. "Harry, go to my office. I'll be along shortly."

"Dumbledore..." Harry started with a growl, but Dumbledore's eyes flashed towards him and Harry almost flinched as a never-ending

pool of powerful magic swirled within them, far greater than anything Harry could muster at such short notice.

He grimaced and flicked his wand. Suddenly the piece of parchment with his blood on it was on fire, and Harry tucked his wand into his robes and with one last scowl at Umbridge, left the room.

"I hope you ripped her a new one," Harry said coldly as Dumbledore entered his office, his eyes hard and his step strong. His long, purple robes trailed after him and Harry noticed that the stitched-on stars were glittering beautifully, casting an almost mysterious glow around the older wizard.

"Unfortunately, there was little I could do," Dumbledore said heavily.

Harry was standing by one of the bookcases, idly browsing through a tattered old tome that floated in front of him. The pages were scrawled in an indecipherable language, more gibberish than anything else, but Harry didn't seem to have any trouble understanding it. Closing the book, entitled 'A comprehensive guide into Winter Politics' by Gellert Grindelwald, Harry turned to Dumbledore with fire in his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

"She tried to take my blood!" Harry hissed angrily, gesturing to the back of his now-healed hand. "You know exactly what somebody could do if they had my blood! Voldemort wouldn't need to track me down; all he'd have to do is summon an entropy curse and strike at me when I'm exposed!"

"She was not trying to take your blood, Harry," Dumbledore said, seating himself behind his desk and steepling his fingers together. His eyes flashed with something Harry could only identify as contempt. "What you were using is called a Cruento Quill. It is a rather barbaric disciplinary tool that was quite prevalent during the early years of this century. The user is forced to write lines using their own blood as a substitute. Given enough time, it is possible to carve permanent scars into the back of your hand - a deterrent for even the most hardened mischief-maker."

“Cruento ...” Harry muttered. Suddenly Meciél’s illusion appeared before him, dressed in silver and white robes and sitting at the edge of Dumbledore’s desk with a curious expression on her beautiful face. There was no sound, no shimmer- she was just there.

“It means ‘to be stained with blood’,” she said quietly, studying Dumbledore intently. Her wide silver eyes regarded him carefully, an external reflection of what she was mentally doing at that very moment.

“A derivative of the cruentocurse,” Dumbledore explained. “A dark spell, designed to rupture every single blood vessel in your body. It is a horrible, painful death, spanning many hours if the counter-curse is not applied.”

“Dark magic?” Harry asked slowly. “The quill is based on dark magic?”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said gravely.

“And you caught her?” Harry said with the beginnings of a cold smile. “Good. Throw her out, lock her up in Azkaban and let one of those lesser daemons take her soul. Problem solved.”

“I’m afraid it is not that easy,” Dumbledore sighed heavily. “Dolores Umbridge has not actually performed an illegal act.”

“What?” Harry asked softly and his smile faded. His eyes took on an angry glint as he stared at Dumbledore with an icy expression on his face. “You lot absolutely hate dark magic. It’s bad, it’s evil, it’s wrong, blah, blah, blah. How is it not illegal?”

“One of the many powers of the Hogwarts Headmaster is to decide the appropriate standard of discipline amongst the students,” Dumbledore explained softly, absently stroking his beard. The portraits on the walls were nodding in agreement with him, some of them wearing sour, angry faces. “My predecessor was quite fond of employing the strap as a means to deter mischievous behaviour. I

however, feel that fear and pain do not contribute to an effective learning environment.”

“I think you should be grateful for that, beloved,” Meciell said smoothly and Harry’s head turned to her, seeing a somewhat mischievous smile on her face. “I shudder to think of what you would do if Snape came after you with a cane.”

Harry rolled his eyes and turned back to Dumbledore, who was peering at him with carefully schooled eyes.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Harry snapped coldly.

“As I said, it is the responsibility of the Hogwarts Headmaster to decide what level of discipline the professors at Hogwarts will administer,” Dumbledore said. Annoyance flickered in his eyes and suddenly he looked very cold. “However, Dolores is soon to be the High Inquisitor...”

“What?” Harry interrupted with narrowed eyes. “What crap is this?”

“She is a Ministry representative,” Dumbledore said. “She will soon have an unprecedented control over Hogwarts with the full backing of the Ministry of Magic. My sources tell me that Minister Fudge and Professor Umbridge have already devised a number of ‘educational decrees’- legislation allowing her to impose her own set of rules on the working of Hogwarts.”

“Fuck,” Harry growled softly.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Now, where was I...ah, yes. Technically, Professor Umbridge has done nothing illegal. Yes, she has gone against both my word as Headmaster and the Board of Governors by introducing forbidden disciplinary techniques, but that is not a criminal offence. Had she cast the actual cruentocata curse, then rest assured, Harry, the Auror’s would already be here.”

“Can’t you sack her then?” Harry exclaimed furiously. He was pacing around Dumbledore’s office, looking murderous as tendrils of Hellfire

leaked through his body. "You're the damned Headmaster! Get rid of her for breaking your rules!"

"Professor Umbridge was brought into Hogwarts under Ministry legislation," Dumbledore explained heavily. "Therefore, she can only be removed by Ministry legislation. It is a complicated situation, Harry, one that I fear you may have made worse for yourself."

"Ooh, I probably shouldn't have bitch-slapped her," Harry said, wincing.

"I have convinced Professor Umbridge that you acted out of self-defence and I have rescinded all of your detentions," Dumbledore explained. "She is not the High Inquisitor yet. When she is, I will no longer be able to do this."

"Well, that's good," Harry said, his brows furrowed in thought. He seemed to come to a decision and nodded, before drawing his wand out of his robes. "Right. I'll go and kill her and we'll never have this problem again.'

"Harry," Dumbledore said quickly, halting the young Denarian before he could even move. "You will not kill Professor Umbridge."

"But I want to," Harry said, in an almost child-like whine. He regarded Dumbledore with intent green eyes but the older wizard merely shook his head, not budging an inch.

"Harry," the older wizard said in a warning tone, looking very serious. However, Harry could tell that the man's lips were twitching and there was a certain sparkle behind his half-moon glasses.

"Seriously, it will work," Harry said earnestly, moving forward and placing his hands on Dumbledore's desk. "Meciel's great at making things look like an accident. We'll say that Professor Umbridge 'slipped' and fell onto a pile of cruento quills."

"It might be easier to have her die of something a little more mundane, beloved," Meciel said idly. She had stopped observing Dumbledore and was now gazing around the room with interest, her illusion

focussing on a section that Harry could barely see in his peripheral vision. "Perhaps an accidental drowning or a misspoken incantation would be better."

"If you kill Professor Umbridge then another will take her place," Dumbledore said tiredly, and looked strangely disappointed as he gazed at Harry. "Should that person be the victim of an unfortunate accident, another will take their place and so forth. Tell me, Harry, are you serious?"

"Well, yeah," Harry said slowly. He rolled his eyes and beckoned Dumbledore to come in closer. "I'm going to tell you something that I've never told anyone else."

"Yes, Harry?" Dumbledore asked and moved in closer, although the look on his face was faintly exasperated.

"I'm a sociopath," Harry whispered into Dumbledore's ear and paused. Dumbledore lifted back and merely regarded Harry with a cool gaze. Harry frowned and scratched his chin, looking thoughtful. "Wow. That felt good to get off my chest."

"Although I admit that your outlook on life seems to differ greatly from my own, I doubt that you are a sociopath," Dumbledore said evenly, looking faintly amused. "For instance, sociopaths have no sense of ethics and morality."

"You're a morality," Harry muttered under his breath and backed away from Dumbledore's desk. He sat down with a huff and leant back as Meciél's illusion regarded him with quirked lips, looking faintly amused.

"What does that even mean, beloved?" she asked

"So, I can't kill Umbridge?" Harry asked once more, just in case Dumbledore was having doubts. However, it appeared as if he was not.

"No, you may not," Dumbledore said firmly, shaking his head. "You would only exacerbate matters."

"Come on," Harry protested, looking vaguely irritated. "I know you're not as goody-goody as everybody thinks- Nobody who's ever studied the books you gave me is ever going to be up for sainthood."

"They were a relic of my past," Dumbledore said, almost wistfully, but when Harry turned back to him, the older wizard was staring at him with a pleasant expression.

"Okay," Harry said abruptly. "Umbridge is a total bitch and we both know it. You can't fire her and you won't let me kill her. Are you just going to let her fuck up your school for the rest of the year?"

"We must be patient," Dumbledore advised quietly. He adjusted his glasses and smoothed his beard, his eyes drifting to the row of magical instruments on his shelves. "Lord Voldemort will reveal himself in time. The Order of Phoenix is preparing for the inevitable conflict, but I have learned that he will not move until he has in his possession a piece of vitally important information."

"So you're telling me that the fat-flabby bitch won't leave until Voldemort makes a move, and Voldemort won't make a move until he has his information?" Harry asked with raised eyebrows. Dumbledore inclined his head. "This information, how important is it?"

"At the present moment, there is nothing more important than keeping it out of Lord Voldemort's hands," Dumbledore said gravely. "While it is a secret, it is unknown to him and Lord Voldemort does not like the unknown. It will make him cautious, wary, and perhaps even afraid, to venture forward."

"That's all well and good," Harry said bitingly. "But Umbridge is going to be High Inquisi-thingy sooner or later, sooner by the sounds of it, and she'll be after me again with those damned quills. If she does, then I will have to kill her and make it look like accident."

"Harry..."

"Nobody gets my blood," Harry said and his eyes flashed with Hellfire. "Voldemort got it once, but nobody else! Never again!"

Dumbledore sighed and looked incredibly weary- his face was sagging and the brightness in his eyes was dulling with stress. Meciél's illusion studied him closely, her face blank, while Harry refused to be sympathetic and stood his ground.

"I will alert the Board of Governors and let them know that Professor Umbridge has overstepped her bounds," Dumbledore said after a moment. "Perhaps pressure from outside sources, say the media, will deter her for a short time."

"It would be a lot easier if Voldemort were to simply reveal himself," Meciél said, and her silver eyes narrowed in thought. "Or better yet, trick the Ministry into believing that Voldemort had revealed himself."

Harry frowned and gazed at her illusion as a quick tumble of information rushed into his mind. He blinked, feeling slightly disorientated, and then he shook his head dazedly. After a moment, a sly grin came over his face.

"That's a good idea, Meciél," he said slowly, still smiling eerily, and he turned to Dumbledore, who was watching with inquisitive eyes. "The Ministry won't believe that Voldemort's back until he reveals himself, right?"

"That's correct," Dumbledore said slowly.

"So, let's give them a Voldemort then," Harry said with a calculating grin. "I could do it. Meciél can help me produce a reasonable illusion- she is rather good at that sort of thing- and I'll 'attack' Diagon Alley or something."

"I won't kill anybody," Harry said hurriedly as Dumbledore frowned. "I'll just rough them up a little, break a few glasses and such, maybe throw a killing curse to prove that I'm the real deal. In for a minute, out the next and voila, there's Voldemort launching an attack."

"Your plan has merits," Dumbledore said after a moments pause. Harry grinned but the Headmaster raised his hand, stopping him before he could say anything. "However, skilled Aurors will be able to

detect the presence of residual concealment magic and they will know it is a fake. That, Harry, could endanger our cause far worse than anything else.”

“Fine,” Harry said, not deterred, and he stared at Dumbledore firmly. “What about a Death Eater cloak and mask? It makes sense that a Death Eater would use a concealment spell rather than a real robe and mask.”

“And if you get caught?” Dumbledore said severely, peering over his glasses at Harry. “Within moments, I can guarantee that Aurors will be on the scene. They are skilled, Harry, far-better trained than most of Lord Voldemort’s servants. You would be hard-pressed to defeat one without killing them and, that, Harry, is something I will not allow to happen. The Ministry will need all of its Aurors very shortly.”

“But...”

“I will consider your plan, Harry,” Dumbledore said sternly. “However, if I choose to enact it then you will not be the wizard for the job. You need to concentrate all of your efforts here, Harry. Once you have your OWLs, then we will talk about your contributions to the Order.”

“My contributions,” Harry repeated icily, his mouth working over as if he had tasted something nasty. “My contributions to your...order. I thought I told you that I wasn’t going to work for you. With you, sure, we’ll kick Voldemort’s arse side-by-side, but not for you”

Harry’s eyes were glittering with anger and he barely noticed when Meciél’s illusion, which had been watching the two wizards carefully, disappeared back into his mind and her warm presence overlapped his, calming him down somewhat.

‘Calm down,’ Meciél soothed and Harry sighed, slightly relaxing. Dumbledore continued to stare at him with a solemn blue gaze and suddenly Harry felt the urge to smash the old man’s nose back into shape.

“Whatever,” Harry interrupted derisively when Dumbledore opened his mouth. “I get it. You’re the boss, the big man, the one in charge.”

He strode for the door, then turned back and narrowed his eyes. "Do yourself a favour- tell Snape to shut the fuck up before I shut him up for you. I'm telling you this because I want to, um, contribute, to your Order and keep the stress of cleaning up a bloody smear in your Potions Lab."

"I will speak to Severus about his conduct," Dumbledore said, steeping his fingers together and not looking at all concerned about Harry's sudden hostility. "However, in the future, perhaps you should not be so antagonistic."

"I didn't throw the damn green shit at him," Harry said and rolled his eyes as he stepped through the door and started to walk down the stairs, his voice getting distant. "I would have aimed for his big, long crooked nose of his. Seriously, the man could use it as a dildo or something..."

Harry arrived at the bottom of the staircase with a scowl on his face. He tightened his robe around him and started to walk. Anger, determination and stubbornness raced through his mind as he briskly walked through the hallway, moving in the opposite direction of the Gryffindor tower

'I assume that we're going to initiate my plan?' Meciell asked, not sounding at all surprised or upset.

'Count on it,' Harry thought grimly as he turned a corner. His wand was clasped in his hand and began to smoke and shimmering red Hellfire rushed into it as Harry allowed the dark power to course through him. 'You do know how to cast the illusion spell, right?'

'Of course, beloved,' Meciell murmured. 'If you give me a few more minutes, I might be able to create a spell that will produce something similar to the dark mark. After all, why should we not go all the way?'

Harry nodded grimly as he stepped out of Hogwarts castle, with his cloak and blazing Hellfire to provide protection against the cold, and started to walk towards the Wizarding town of Hogsmeade- the nearest site where he could disappear. It was going to be an interesting night...

A/N: Sorry for the long update, fellows. I was away a bit last week on a university thing and when I got back, I was more concerned with sleeping and just lazing around than writing. Still, here it is, chapter 13. Enjoy

“So how are we going to do this?” Harry asked, absently wrapping his cloak around himself as he walked down the footpath, passing by large, muddy puddles and parked cars.

Rain spluttered from the sky and Harry winced, wrapping his cloak around himself even tighter. The sky was dark with thick, grey clouds covering most of the night sky, obscuring both the stars and the moon from view. The few muggles on the streets skirted around him, obviously feeling a little wary of the boy who was apparently talking to himself.

Meciel’s illusion was walking by Harry’s side, observing the graffiti-covered walls and boarded-up shops with a faintly repulsed expression. Her robes and cloak, silver and white, almost seemed to glow, and her illusion was so perfect that rain splashed on her sleek dark hair and her robes were beginning to drip with water.

“For now, we’ll merely introduce the idea of a Death Eater attack,” Meciel answered quietly, swinging her silver gaze back to Harry. “This will be a long-term effort, beloved, and I do not expect to achieve any immediate results.”

“Long term,” Harry groaned. “Can’t we...I dunno, go and find Minister Brownie and torture him or something. That’ll get his attention”

“Fudge,” Meciel corrected, looking amused.

“Whatever,” Harry dismissed with a wave of his hand. “He can be Minister Cupcake for all I care, as long as Umbridge pisses off.”

“Your idea has merit,” Meciel said, idly stepping around another pedestrian and daintily leaping over a small puddle. She appeared to be enjoying the opportunity to flex her creative mental muscles. “However, for some strange reason I don’t seem to have Fudge’s

current schedule on me at the moment. I don't suppose you could lend me a copy?"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Harry muttered.

"Besides, Fudge is the Minister of Magic, so you can expect to encounter some heavy resistance. I do not doubt that you could succeed, but you would not be able to get away without your identity being revealed," Meciél said smoothly, wiping down her robes and frowning. The light-coloured material was clinging to her curvaceous body, emphasising the rather curvy nature of the illusion. "You are such a pervert, beloved."

"Hey, if you show then I'll look," Harry said with a lecherous grin, his eyes sparkling. Suddenly, without any movement on Meciél's part, her robes were dry and the raindrops were leaving no visible mark on her beautiful form. "Oh, you're no fun," he pouted.

"Back on task," Meciél said, although her lips were curled up into a beautiful smile. She gestured with one hand to a small, shabby pub-front on the other side of the street. "The Leaky Cauldron- a perfect target. There will be enough people so as to draw the right amount of attention. The Ministry will not cover this up easily."

"And I won't be tracked?" Harry asked, glancing at his wand carefully. Meciél had made him perform over a dozen different spells on it. Now it resembled a wand of pure white wood, far longer and skinnier than Harry was used to.

"Of course not," Meciél said, almost sounding offended. "You have been hiding from magical tracking systems like these your entire life. I assure you, beloved, they will not find you."

"Okay, let's do this," Harry said with a deep breath and quickly gazed around. Most of the other pedestrians were huddled a little further up the road, using the store fronts to try to shield themselves from the rain.

His wand in hand, Hellfire blazed through him and Harry released control to Meciél. The Fallen's illusion disappeared before his eyes

and her warm presence seeped into the forefront of his mind, her overwhelming consciousness flittering dangerously close to his own. She was a maelstrom of power and pure presence, threatening to tear his fragile human psyche apart, but she didn't. Instead, Harry felt his arm rise above his head and his wrist move in a peculiar half-spin, with a sharp vertical flick at the end. Something spread over his body, something icy-cold, but it was gone in an instant and suddenly it was like he was wearing a thick jumper.

'There you are,' Meciél said, sounding satisfied, and once again, Harry was in control.

He staggered as his nervous system came back online all at once, a sensation akin to pins-and-needles shooting all around his body. He suppressed the feelings of unease at being dominated so easily and glanced at one of the nearby parked cars, observing himself in the side mirror. A wide grin crossed his face as his hands raised to touch the glinting silver mask covering his face.

"Excellent."

Tom sighed, absently wiping at one of the dirty mugs in front of him with an enchanted rag. The mug gleamed as the rag both cleaned and polished it, working far better than the floating brush scrubbing at dirty plates in the sink behind him. With a sigh of satisfaction, Tom thumped the glass down and threw the rag onto the bar, brushing off his large, calloused hands.

He peered through the dim, gloomy bar, idly noting that Sebastian Shane was nursing his third firewhiskey and giving the odd hiccup every now and then, releasing more smoke into the air than the pair of poorly-disguised hags that were smoking pipes that blew out green smoke over in the far corner. Good old Murtie McMilliam was talking amiably with, in Tom's opinion, a rather shady character, and the old bartender made a note to keep an eye on the two of them.

Lightning flashed from beyond the windows, briefly illuminating the room far greater than the flickering fireplace could, and a moment later came the resounding boom of thunder. Tom unconsciously shivered. He was looking forward to curling up in bed tonight with a

warm bottle of butterbeer and the good-old classics on the Wizard Wireless Network.

Suddenly the door leading to the Muggle world creaked open and Tom's head shot around. A tall, dark-cloaked figure entered the pub, his head bowed. Rain glistened over his robes and water dripped to the ground, giving the man a rather eerie appearance. His head still bowed, Tom had the impression that the man was surveying the bar and its surroundings. The other patrons, once seeing him, turned away and resumed their soft chatter

Tom, however, suddenly felt an uneasy sensation slink into his stomach. Something was wrong here. Still, he plastered a huge smile on his face and his voice rang out with forced cheerfulness,

"Good evening, sir," He boomed out cheerily. "It is mighty cold out there tonight. Can I get you anything? Anything at all?"

The hooded man seemed to cock his head as if considering something. After a moment, he gave a slow nod and responded, his voice a soft, serpent-like hiss that sent shivers down Tom's spine.

"Yes, you can," the man responded coldly and raised his hooded head. A gleaming silver mask covered his face and Tom froze with fear as he stared into the eyeholes- as dark as pitch-black night. A slender wooden wand was suddenly in the man's hand as he took a step forward, attracting the attention of every single member of the bar. "You can submit to the Dark Lord. Do so and he will spare your lives and the lives of your family."

The bar was silent as the man- a Death Eater of You-Know-Who, stood there, his robes suddenly dry and an eerie shadow spreading out from behind. The torches on the wall flickered, the flames suddenly accosted by an icy wind. For a second, nobody moved. Then, one of the braver patrons- somebody who had some skill with the way he drew his wand- attacked.

'Stup-"he started, but the Death Eater was faster. His arm rosed and his wand, clutched by a dark gloved hand, flicked through the air.

“Crucio!” The Death Eater hissed and suddenly the other wizard was screaming in agony, dropping to the ground and flailing about as he scratched at his entire body.

The Death Eater broke the curse after a moment and turned back to Tom. Although the barkeeper couldn’t see his face, he could almost imagine the sinister smile that crossed the Death Eater’s face as he whispered, “I’ll take that as a no then.”

Harry, cloaked in the Death Eater garb, stalked forward, knowing full well that his opponents were seeing a movement resembling that of a glide. Dark power was pumping through his entire body as Hellfire and the lingering, almost ecstatic backlash of the Cruciatus Curse flared in his mind.

‘Expelliarmus!’ One of the patrons shouted, wearing brown robes and a patched hood. His chubby face was ashen with fear and his were hands quivering as he faced against what he thought was a Death Eater.

A bright red bolt of light shot out of his wand and missed Harry completely, sending one of the barstools flying through the air. It crashed against the wall as Harry gave a few sharp flicks of his wand, not uttering a single word. The man gave a startled yelp as something struck him across the face and his wand flew out of his hand. With a flick of Harry’s wand, the man gurgled and clawed at his throat as he was lifted up into the air by a powerful force. Another flick and the brown-robed wizard rocketed into the air, past a group of wizards who had jumped to their feet with their wands out, and into the wall.

There was a distinctive crack as the man slid down the wall on the other side of the bar, right next to the exit leading into Diagon Alley. He was groaning softly as he feebly crawled through the doorway to safety and Harry turned to confront the next two, a wide grin on his hidden face. Battle-lust reigned in his mind, carefully restrained by Meci.

“Ferito!” One of them yelled desperately, covering his friend as they sprinted for the door leading to the muggle world. A loud crack filled the air, similar to apparition, and a hazy ball of dim light shot at Harry as the first wizard opened the door and disappeared into the night.

Harry extended his hand and with a deft spell, caught it in his open palm. He paused as the wizard's eyes widened and he literally gaped at the sight, before he, like his friend, dove out of the bar with terror in his eyes. Before they had even left, Harry swung to the left and hurled the ball of hazy light at a rising wizard. The ball struck him in the chest and suddenly the blue-robed wizard bent over, gasping for breath as he clutched his stomach.

He collapsed, sending his barstool clattering to the ground, when suddenly it became a vicious, snarling dog. Harry's eyes widened as two very ugly women approached him with outstretched wands. Their faces were marked with boils and scars and their leering eyes glared at him hatefully.

"Kill him!" The first hag growled and the dog leapt for him with a roaring bark, while the second hag gestured with her wand. A thin, azure coil of mist-like magic sprang for him, lashing out like a vine. Harry deflected it with his wand, literally parrying the spell away with a crimson burst of light, while he tried to turn for the dog.

'Duck!' Meciél hissed.

At the same time as the dog leapt for him, saliva drooling from its very large fangs, the barkeeper had flicked his wand. Suddenly, over a dozen dusty bottles flew from the overhead rack above the bar and shot at Harry. They missed, slamming into the dog and sending it sprawling to the ground. It was still growling as Harry arose gracefully, the tip of his wand glowing with dark power as he sent a single golden spark at it. The spark struck the dog and it howled in agony as it burst into flames- the hags both screamed incantations and sent streaks of murky yellow light at him, which he parried into nearby tables and then whirled around, his cloak flying behind him and his wand levelling towards Tom.

As the two tables shuddered and exploded under the force of the no-doubt illegal spells of the Hags, Tom's eyes widened and with a panicked yell, he dove behind his bar. The thick wood between him and Harry would have done him little good had Harry actually been

aiming at him. Instead, Harry directed his wand at the other side of the bar.

“Cornollivo!” Harry whispered arm buckled as a streak of dark-coloured magic burst from his wand and an eerie screech filled the air.

It struck the bar and the wood splintered, cracked and gave way in a thunderous boom. The bottle holder above the bar fell to the ground and bottles thudded loudly on the debris with only the occasional smash, the charms on them preventing most of them from being smashed. Harry whirled around again, guided by Meciél’s instincts and her blazing Hellfire to sidestep- narrowly avoiding a curse that cracked like a whip as it snapped past his ear, gouging into one of the tables and sending it splintering to the ground.

“Tegocavo!” Harry hissed, thrusting his wand at one of the hags before summoning a large ball of flickering flames- absent of its usual Hellfire- and throwing it at a corner in the bar.

As a single, glowing dart-like burst of light blasted forward from his wand, dark magic in the fireball exploded with a thunderous boom and suddenly the bar was on fire. Smoke pumped into the air as one of the hags flicked her wand, wordlessly casting a glittering dome of silver magic around her, while the other, with an elaborate twirl, sent a column of buzzing bees after him.

The hag suddenly screamed as the dart struck her shield and shattered it instantly, her mad eyes widening. Harry grimaced as one of her boils exploded in a shower of thick, white pus but it didn’t slow him as his wand whipped through the air, almost as fast as lightning.

“Abhorreo!” He hissed softly, and a shimmering blue streak of magic shot through the air. Then Harry spun around, catching a shimmering streak of sapphire magic and dragging it with the tip of his wand.

As the shimmering blue curse swallowed up the angry bees, Harry threw the streak of magic at the barkeeper, who deflected it with an awkward flick of his wand, his eyes smouldering with anger. The first hag, still reeling from her shattered protego shield, shrieked as the

curse struck her. Her body trembled as if she was having a seizure and spittle flew out of her mouth as she collapsed to the ground.

The other hag shrieked, fury evident in her voice, and brandished her wand. Her curse, which Harry recognised as a very powerful slicing charm, missed him completely and shot through the air. It sliced apart one of the tables and hit the wall next to the staircase, just as a balding wizard with tired eyes was striding down with a grumpy expression. Tom flicked his wand again, launching a simultaneous attack by sending a horde of bottles flying through the air while shooting a red blast of light at him.

As the wall near the staircase was gouged and the balding wizard stared into what he thought was the soulless eyes of a Death Eater, Harry sidestepped the reductor curse and, deliberately ignoring one of the bottles, he raised his wand.

“Avada Kedav-argh!” He hissed, forcing pain into his voice as the bottle slammed into his illusionary back. It was no more than a dull thump but Harry staggered forward with a pained grunt, his arm flying up into the air as green light pooled at the tip of his wand.

There was loud rushing noise, as if an invisible wind were roaring through the room, and a blinding streak of green light blasted forward, striking the ceiling with a flash of green sparks. The scent of powerful dark magic, like a greasy, oily stain, filled the air as the hag instinctively flinched with terror. At the same time, the balding wizard stormed back up the stairs with cries of “Death Eater’s are attacking! Death Eater’s are attacking!”

The hag grabbed her fallen kin and with terror in her eyes, disappeared from the bar. Harry whirled around, absently swatting away two well-cast but ultimately powerless hexes and levelled his wand at the barkeeper. Instead of casting a spell, Harry spoke up, his voice a soft hiss even to his own ears.

“Tell all what you have seen here,” Harry whispered coldly, greatly enjoying the expression of terror he saw flying over Tom’s face. “The Dark Lord has arisen. His faithful are flocking to his side. Soon, the Wizarding World will be free of filthy scum like those bloodmuds.”

"Bloodmuds?" The Barkeeper asked in a quivering voice, looking confused. Dark fire started to roar in one of the corners of the bar, foul, greasy smoke pumping into the air. "W-What are bloodmuds?"

"Are you mocking me?" Harry hissed with a threatening swipe of his wand.

'It's Mudbloods, beloved,' Meciél said with a light laugh. 'I believe it is 'Mudbloods and Muggle-loving filth.'

"N-No...no I'm not!" The barkeeper croaked, gripping his wand with whitened knuckles. He was sweating, his greasy apron covered with the sawdust caused by Harry's destruction of his bar.

"You don't seem to be one of those Muggle-loving pieces of filth," Harry hissed and gestured with his wand at the door. "So I shall spare your life. Leave now, or I will kill you. Take the pathetic wizard who tried to curse me with you."

The barkeeper swallowed but quickly strode around the bar under Harry's watchful gaze. The occupants of the rooms upstairs were quickly beginning to make noise, and Harry heard screams of panic and fear over the loud cracks of apparition. The barkeeper quickly murmured a word and the fallen wizard, still shuddering under the brief effects of the Cruciatus Curse, hovered off the ground. With one last glance at Harry, the barkeeper broke into a run and literally threw himself through the door leading to Diagon Alley, the injured wizard floating after him.

"Terramotus!" Harry snapped coldly, gesturing to the ground around him. The tip of his wand sprayed out a shower of brown sparks and suddenly a loud shudder ran through the wooden floorboards. The very ground rumbled, almost throwing Harry off his feet, while there was a large splintering sound as cracks tore through the floor, leaving gaping holes. Beneath the floor, Harry could see glimpses of a dimly lit basement.

'I think we're done,' Meciél said, observing the destruction around Harry with a critical eye.

Tables, chairs and barstools lay in splintered heaps, the bar had been literally torn in two and bottles lay scattered all over the ground. There was a bright fire flickering in the corner of the pub, dark magical flames slowly eating away at the flame-repulsion charms that protected most of the tables, chairs and walls.

"I haven't had this much fun in ages," Harry said with a chuckle as he lowered his wand. Hellfire still raged in his mind but he suppressed the dark feelings it brought along with it. "Random violence is always cool."

'If you say so, beloved,' Meciél said in amusement. Suddenly, just as Harry was about to turn and leave, the fireplace in the wall flared with a sudden burst of green light and two witches suddenly tumbled out.

"Bloody Shackelbolt," the witch groaned, rubbing her head dazedly. She sported long violet hair, striking orange eyes and long crimson robes.

"Language, Tonks," the second witch, an older, grizzled woman with an eye-patch over her left eye. She donned the same crimson robes as the other women, although they were lined with a distinctive silver trim. She emerged from the fire on her feet, looking down as she absently dusted herself off. "Lets..."

The witch trailed off and her good eye widened as she took in the scene. Harry grinned at her expression; she looked completely shocked, while her partner staggered up, her face grim.

"This was no bar fight," Tonks mumbled, before her eyes widened as she spotted Harry lurking in the shadows. Harry knew what he must look like- long dark cloak and a Death Eater mask. His wand was already raised.

"Niteo tutaminis!" Harry said casually.

A startling flash of white light burst from his wand and the younger Auror gave a cry of shock as she rocketed backwards, something

powerful slamming into her chest. Pain flew across her face as she fell to the ground, her wand clattering from her hand.

The other woman moved quickly, far more quickly than any other wizard he had duelled tonight, and suddenly the air between them was full of streaks of coloured lights. Harry was taken aback by the sheer volume of spells that the other woman was producing and fell back, his wand flying through the air as he parried and deflected the minor spells.

Blasts of crimson light slammed into the ground, streaks of oddly shaped teal magic were parried into the walls. Although the spells were not powerful, they were plentiful. The grizzled woman he faced had some sort of system for casting, a rapid-paced blur of wand movements that saw him have some initial trouble with working out the exact combination of spells.

‘An Auror!’ Meciell said quickly. ‘She is too well trained to be anything else. Either flee or incapacitate her quickly before she calls for reinforcement. You could kill her, I suppose, but I would not want to be in your head when Dumbledore finds out.’

After a few moments, as the Auror and the ‘Death Eater’ duelled across the cracked and broken expanse of floorboards and shattered, wooden heaps, Harry saw an opening that would not turn to the Auror into a charred husk and grinned.

“Colligadicio!” Harry barked as the Auror paused for just an instant, using the time to take a huge breath.

A shimmering light gathered around him and the Auror’s eyes widened even as she cast the next burst of furiously-paced spells. Two bursts of scarlet light, three streaks of yellow and theropy-vines of a binding spell struck the hazy, distorted light and suddenly hung there in the air, motionless. With a broad gesture, Harry threw them back at the Auror and grinned.

The Auror had some difficulty dispelling her own spells, but even as an incantation left Harry’s lips, she had already side-stepped and conjured a solid steel shield on her left arm. Harry’s bolt of magic,

akin to an electrical discharge, zapped through the air and struck against the conjured item. Although the spell exploded in a shower of sparks, arcs of crackling magic leapt up her arm and she dropped the conjured shield with a grimace of pain.

"Ventosus!" The Auror cried out immediately, cradling her left arm to her chest. A gust of wind circled her body, looping around stray bits of wood and debris and shooting them at Harry.

Harry took a step forward with his wand raised but paused as the bits of debris became a flock of crying seagulls. With an annoyed growl, Harry gestured to the fierce flames on the other side of the room. Dark oily smoke poured forth and struck the flock of seagulls, flinging them aside with their noxious fumes.

"Frendo!" Harry barked out, a wide grin splitting his lips, Hellfire pouring into the potency of the spell and producing a streak of magic so powerful that the very ground shuddered before it.

Behind the thin haze of smog, the Auror's eyes widened as a sudden realisation poured into them, even as she raised her solid shield. She knew that it wouldn't protect her from the powerful dark spell. The only thing that saved her from death was that Harry wasn't aiming for her, and a thunderous blast of dark purple magic tore into the ceiling above her. There was a loud groan as plaster, wood and pipes showered the ground as the powerful spell detonated in a flash of blinding light.

"Tonks!" The other Auror cried as she whipped her wand around, magically deflecting the debris that rained down on her

Harry saw that the other witch was nearing the green fire, speaking something into it with a dazed expression on her face. At the same time, a large piece of splintered wood was falling directly towards her. Her partner waved her wand and suddenly the wood was yanked away. At the same time, Harry saw his opening and lunged. With a serpent-like striking movement, he jabbed his wand forward.

The Auror rocked back and forth on her feet, fear coming into her eyes as she clutched her chest and gurgled loudly. Blood dripped

down her nose as Harry, with careful movements, released his tight grip on the woman's heart and threw her aside with a swipe of his wand. She tumbled to the ground and suddenly Harry was moving, leaping across the room and tumbling outside.

He was standing in the small courtyard between Diagon Alley and the Leaky Cauldron. The barrier was closed and a limp, unconscious wizard- the same one Harry had cursed earlier- lay near it. Adrenaline was surging through his veins, the exhilaration of battle producing a wide smile on Harry's face as he raised his wand.

Meciel whispered instructions in his ear and Harry paused, his mouth wrapping around a strange incantation.

"Morsmordre!" He shouted loudly, his disguised voice awash with exhilaration.

From his wand arose a giant symbol of eerie green magic. A laughing skull with gleaming eyes leered down at them as a snake coiled around it and protruded from its mouth. From beyond the wall, Harry could hear the first signs of fear as a loud, piercing scream filled the air. Just as the door burst open and the grizzled Auror, along with two others, rushed into the courtyard, Harry twirled on his feet and disappeared.

After nine more apparitions, one back to Diagon Alley itself, Harry apparated on the outskirts of the small Wizarding town outside of Hogwarts. For a moment, he just stood there; the weather was a lot nicer in Scotland than it was in London. Then, with a casual wave of his wand, the long robe and silver mask melted away, and his wand, which had been white and long, suddenly darkened in colour and lost some of its length.

"Now that was fun," Harry said with a grin on his face as he almost bounded his way back to the glittering castle of Hogwarts. He was feeling quite pleased with himself. Not only had the 'mission' been a complete success, but he had tested himself against two Auror's- the Ministry's finest- and even after holding back, he had defeated them.

Meciel's illusion appeared silently by his side.

"You look like you enjoyed yourself," she said, watching Harry with an indulgent smile on her face.

"Better than school," Harry snorted as he approached the looming castle gates. Some part of him was hesitant to approach, knowing that Dumbledore would probably be furious at him, but the majority of him almost wanted Dumbledore to bring it on. Victory was like a euphoic drug and at the moment, Harry felt as if he could do anything.

The addictive nature of Hellfire didn't help in that regard either.

"Indeed," Meciél murmured softly, emitting a silvery aura in the darkness that merely made her more enchanting. "It would be been better for the cause if you had killed that Auror, but we must stay in Dumbledore's good books. It is a pity- I find that eviscerating a few people here and there gets your message across quite clearly."

"You're an evil bitch, Meciél," Harry said with a soft chuckle. Meciél smiled blandly and said nothing.

The storm was raging uncontrollably as he strode up the beach. His eyes peeked out of his hood as he clutched his soaked robes to his chest, shivering as the icy-coldness seemed to seep into his very bones. Anxiety and fear rushed through his body, causing his heart to throb against his chest, almost painfully. An inner conflict raged within him, fear of the place and fear of his Master.

He could feel the derisive stares of the other servants of the Dark Lord, their forms tall and straight, as if the storm wasn't even touching them. Lightning flashed through the air and he got a glimpse of the ominous structure before him, catching glimpses of foreboding walls of stone and large, looming turrets. He flinched as another clap of thunder filled the air and waited.

It wasn't long before the first of the damned began to stagger from the mist. Haggard, gaunt wizards and witches, many without any trace of sanity in their eyes, staggered forward. Their leader, a pale, sickly-thin witch sporting a wide fanatical grin, approached Wormtail with a delirium clouding her eyes.

“The Dark Lord....” She cackled loudly, grasping him painfully by the shoulders. “I knew he would not abandon us...I knew it! The Dark Lord has returned for us!”

Prying the crazed witch’s arms off his shoulders, Wormtail took a quick step backwards and shivered- a shiver that had absolutely nothing to do with the cold.

Harry shot up in his bed, shivering uncontrollably as he panted. He was so cold, as if he had been drenched in freezing water, and only a blast of warmth from Meciél was able to dispel the icy-coldness that seemed to have seeped into his bone. A sour expression on his face, Harry rubbed his tired eyes and flopped back into bed.

“You’re going to work on this, right?” He mumbled sleepily, wrapping his covers around him and tossing over in his beds.

‘Go back to sleep, beloved,’ Meciél said soothingly. ‘I will see what I can decipher of this.’

A moment later, Harry had fallen back to sleep.

The next morning, Harry walked into the hall and immediately felt Dumbledore’s piercing stare hit him. He rolled his eyes and stared back flatly, stubborn green eyes meeting Dumbledore’s disapproving gaze. A moment passed then Harry broke the gaze, annoyance flaring in his mind.

“Hypocrite,” he muttered under his breath. “He’s willing to give me books on dark magic but he’s not willing to see me use my skills for something productive.”

‘I don’t think he likes being ignored,’ Meciél offered as Harry strode over to the Gryffindor table, plonking down on a seat and leaning forward to snag the last rasher of bacon from the middle of the table.

“Oh, have a cry why don’t you,” Harry grumbled, an exasperated expression flashing over his face.

He took a bite out of his breakfast and idly noted that the Gryffindor table was a lot less boisterous than usual. There was something

missing that he usually noticed at breakfast- and then, it hit him. There were no morons trying to engage him in conversation. Harry looked up and frowned when he saw Ron, Amanda, Neville and Hermione huddled around a copy of the Daily Prophet. Their expressions, especially Neville's, were bleak. Feeling curious despite himself, Harry stood up wandered over, peering over their shoulder at the headlines that had them so engaged.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN!

THE LEAKY CAULDRON ATTACKED BY SIRIUS BLACK!

"What?" Harry hissed and with movements too quick to be properly seen, he snatched the newspaper out of Amanda's hands and scanned the front page with narrowed eyes, ignoring the cries of protest from the fifth year Gryffindors.

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban. Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, confirmed that over twenty high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of the morning. Ten of the prisoners have been identified as notorious Death Eaters- former servants of You-Know-Who known for the terrible atrocities they committed against decent witches and wizards back in the dark days.

"Once again, we find ourselves in the same position as we were two and a half years ago when Sirius Black escaped," Fudge commented. "We don't think that these two breakouts are unrelated either. An escape of this magnitude requires outside help- and who better from the second in command of the former wizard He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Merely hours before the breakout, an unidentified wizard donned in the robes of a Death Eater stormed the Leaky Cauldron, demanding the occupants to bow down to "the dark lord" and putting two wizards in Saint Mungo's before fleeing as Aurors arrived at the scene.

"Nor do we think that the attack is unrelated," Fudge said. "The so called Death Eater was most likely Sirius Black himself, probably

trying to create a diversion before breaking his fellow dark wizards out of Azkaban.”

When asked to comment on Black’s comments, Fudge was dismissive.

“Black was imprisoned in Azkaban for twelve years,” Fudge said. “Twelve years around dementors can do things to a wizard, especially one as deranged and mad as Black was. He wasn’t even sane when we put him in there.”

The infamous Sirius Black is most known for the killing of one wizard and twelve muggles with a single curse. The Ministry fears that he may become a rallying point to the escapees and urges everybody to report anything suspicious immediately....

“Fuck,” Harry cursed under his breath. He sat down, pushing Amanda and Ron out of the way to make space, his eyes still on the paper.

In the middle of the front page was a row of ten small photographs—the worst Death Eaters of the escapees. Some of them looked sullen, others desperate, and there were one or two who seemed to be jeering, tapping the frame of their pictures and looking insolent. Harry’s eyes were drawn to the picture of the witch. She sported unkempt and straggly hair, heavily lidded eyes and an arrogant smile played around her thin mouth. It was the witch he had seen last night.

‘So that’s what the vision was about,’ Meciell said slowly. ‘Voldemort has taken back his most loyal, if unstable, servants.’

‘That’s probably not good for the Ministry,’ Harry said and paused. ‘Or Dumbledore. Or us, for that matter.’

Harry’s eyes sought out Dumbledore, who was sitting at the head table. He had turned his gaze away from Harry and was speaking to McGonagall with a serious expression, the witch nodding every so often with her lips tightly pressed against one another. Umbridge was digging into her porridge, throwing Dumbledore and McGonagall malevolent glances, her pouchy toad’s eyes glittering with deep-seated anger.

With a sigh, Harry turned back to the paper and scowled at Daily Prophet. Picking up a fork, his mind wandered back to Meciél as he idly scratched one of the faces, ignoring their angry glares.

“Who the hell is Sirius Black, anyway?” He muttered sourly.

A/N: Okay people, can I suggest that we all take a deep breath and calm down. Some of the reviewers are getting a little animated with each other. Neo, thanks for the praise but Dragonmaster has the right to give his outtake on what he thinks of the story (I presume it's a he, but you never know. You have no idea how many people think I'm a female). Cheers for that review Dragonmaster. I'll try to clear up most of the points you raised in this story, although I'll say that the gold thing was a mistake and the height thing- well, honestly, I don't see why it's such a big deal.

Sorry for the long wait on this chapter. I've been distracted by the awesomeness of Final Fantasy XII and Dawn of War: Dark Crusade, the latter prompting me to buy the Ciaphas Cain Omnibus from the Warhammer 40k section at Borders. I've also been, to be quite honest, suffering from some motivation problems, so I think a small break was good for me.

"I didn't do it," was the first thing that escaped Harry's mouth as he strode into Dumbledore's office that morning. "And seriously, this is the third time we've met in two days. If you're trying some kind of last-century speed-dating...well, you can forget about it. My arse is taugt and that's the way it's going to remain."

Dumbledore, for his part, raised an eyebrow in Harry's direction and steepled his fingers together. For the most part he looked completely relaxed, but Harry could see that beyond his polite smile and twinkling eyes, the other wizard was angry.

'Angry?' Meciell murmured. 'I'm thinking more along the lines of 'pissed off' would be correct.'

"Didn't do what, Harry?" Dumbledore inquired politely, absently brushing down his long purple and silver robes. With his mismatched socks and overly large wizards hat, he looked quite ridiculous.

"Do whatever it is that made you call me up here," Harry said and took a step forward. He gave a half-hearted wave to the portraits, many of whom scowled back at him and shook their fists. "Long time no see, fellows. How's it hanging?"

"Why, you cheeky little..." one of the portraits, a wizened old wizard with an extremely long beard and peculiarly big ears grumbled loudly.

"See, Dumbledore," Harry said as he sat down, a little smile on his face. "I just made a wisecrack there while appearing to be polite. How's it hanging...and they're paintings...get it?"

"Are you aware of what you have done?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"Well, gee," Harry said after a moment, blinking languidly. "I didn't know it meant so much to you. If you want, I could apologise to Professor Big-Ears over there, but I think he might know that you're making me do it, since he's listening to every word I'm saying. Isn't that right, Headmaster Wedge-Nut?"

"Harry..." Dumbledore began with a sigh.

"You know what we should get him for Christmas?" Harry continued, eying the furious wizard beyond the portrait shrewdly. "A spanner. That way we could tighten those bolts and maybe his brain will stop leaking out onto his beard- oh, wait, that's just old man drool."

"You can not delay the inevitable," Dumbledore said after a moment's pause. He leaned back in his chair and regarded Harry over his glasses, looking grave. "I know you left the school last night. I know it was right after the rather heated discussion we had- the one where I cautioned you against imitating Death Eater attacks. I know you ignored my warnings and proceeded to attack the Leaky Cauldron in the guise of a Death Eater. I know you returned back to Hogwarts seventeen minutes after the Aurors drove you away."

"Had to apparate a few more times for security and crap," Harry shrugged carelessly, not looking at all bothered. "And they didn't drive me away- I left at my own convenience. Seriously Dumbledore, if those Aurors are the best you've got then no wonder Voldemort's kicking your arse."

"One was Auror Trainee Nymphadora Tonks, a valued member of the Order of Phoenix." Dumbledore said, a tad sharply. "You might be

pleased to know that she suffered no permanent injury, just a mild concussion.”

“Of course she didn’t,” Harry scoffed with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I was gentle on them. They were really quite pathetic, to be honest.”

Dumbledore said nothing but peered at Harry with an indecipherable expression on his face. Harry couldn’t tell if he was disappointed, angry, saddened or even- was that satisfaction that Harry had just spotted?

“You are quite powerful, Harry,” Dumbledore said so abruptly that Harry blinked. “And your level of skill with a wand for somebody your age is remarkable. You are far better than I was with curses when I was your age.”

“Um...thanks?” Harry offered hesitantly, looking confused and suspicious at the sudden praise. “But seriously, Dumbledore, it takes more than a few pick-up lines to get into my pants.”

“However,” Dumbledore continued, as if Harry hadn’t spoken. “You are not the most powerful, nor the most skilled wizard in the world. You yourself should know this. You have met enemies and allies that have far exceeded you in power and skill.”

“Some, maybe,” Harry said slowly, narrowing his eyes.

“Many,” Dumbledore disagreed quietly. “There is myself, who, with false modesty aside, is one of the most powerful wizards that this world has seen for quite some time. There is Maeve, although I doubt you could call her a true ally. Her powers lie beyond mine and her nature knows nothing of humanity. There are the Knights, who had skills that seemed to bypass the magic of even the most powerful of wizards. Then there are your enemies; Lord Voldemort, who has powers and talents that I could only dream of, The Merlin of the White Council, a truly formidable wizard if what I have heard is true, Vesper of the Denarians...”

“Whoa,” Harry interrupted quickly, a scowl forming on his face. He raised his hands, shaking them to make Dumbledore stop. “Let’s get a few things straight. The Knights aren’t going to hurt me- I’m one of them now, and Vesper may be older than I am and have a little more skill, but I’m definitely more powerful than she is.”

“Even so...” Dumbledore said evenly.

“And,” Harry continued, a scowl forming on his face. “You can’t guilt me out by reading the top-ten list of the most powerful people in the world. At least make it the top-twenty. I did knock off Nicodemus, a Drakon and Azzeh- that’s gotta make me number eleven, at least.”

“There is a vast difference between number eleven and number one,” Dumbledore noted.

“Yeah, it’s ten,” Harry muttered sourly, folding his arms. He levelled a challenging stare at Dumbledore, ignoring the way the other wizard’s eyes had hardened, ignoring the way the other wizard’s eyes had hardened. “I couldn’t help but notice that you didn’t included ‘Aurors’ on that little list of yours, so you really can’t dispute me on this. There was no way that they were going to catch me.”

“You do not realise the damage you have done,” Dumbledore said and stood abruptly. His eyes were focussed on Fawkes and he absently stroked her rich plumage. Harry noted the classic inhuman stare of the Fae in the bird’s eyes and made a face as Dumbledore continued. “I thought we had agreed that neither of us would act in such a manner before I had given it some serious thought.”

“No, no, no,” Harry uttered quickly and shook his head. “We didn’t agree. You,” and here he jabbed his finger at Dumbledore, “ordered me not to do anything so that you could think about. But Meciél and I both agreed that you could go fuck a goat and did it anyway.”

“You do not understand Lord Voldemort’s nature,” Dumbledore said, taking a deep breath and idly stroking Fawkes again. “I have studied and witnessed his tactics and methods. There are specialists in the Ministry of Magic who have also studied his tactics to a great extent.

“So?” Harry asked, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

“Lord Voldemort’s methods are subtle,” Dumbledore continued and turned back to Harry, his eyes hard. “You were anything but. Lord Voldemort has a purpose behind every raid. You had none. Lord Voldemort makes sure that his servants never operate in small numbers. You were alone.”

“Alright, alright,” Harry snapped. “I get the picture. At least I’m doing something. The Ministry can’t be fucked getting off its high horse and just what exactly has your Order been doing again?”

“We are doing much the same as Voldemort is doing,” Dumbledore replied patiently. “We are increasing our numbers, gathering vital information, preparing ourselves for the inevitable conflict and safeguarding certain weapons and information that Lord Voldemort desires.”

“Well, it’s good that you’re doing something useful,” Harry said sarcastically. “You know, if you give me a list of wizards you know as Death Eaters then I can get rid of them for you- for a price, of course.”

“I don’t think we’re quite there yet, Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly. “But once again, we have gotten off topic. We are here to discuss your actions last night.”

“It could have worked,” Harry protested quickly, looking stubborn and refusing to budge. He crossed his arms and settled back into the chair. “If it weren’t for you, it just might have. I mean, without you here, I would have killed everybody and made it more convincing.”

“I’m glad to see that I’m having such a strong impact on your life,” Dumbledore said, almost dryly.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you,” Harry grumbled. “It’s all this Sirius Black’s fault. Who is that bastard anyway? He sounds familiar.”

“Familiar?” Dumbledore echoed softly and his gaze went distant, retreating into the far depths of his mind. “I suppose it might be. You did see him quite a lot when you were a baby.”

"What?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Sirius Black is the great injustice that I was referring to," Dumbledore said quietly, ignoring Harry's question and focussing his penetrating stare back on Harry, who stood steadfast and refused to budge. He stroked his beard and moved away from Fawkes to sit back down behind his desk. "Sirius Black did not commit these crimes, yet the world now thinks he did. Is that fair, Harry?"

"Crimes," Harry repeated slowly, his mind whirling as Meciél pushed some long, almost-forgotten memory towards him. He grasped it and suddenly it hit him. "Hang on, he's that murderer! I remember somebody telling me last year....he broke out of Azkaban and...came here, right?"

"He is a convicted murderer, yes," Dumbledore answered slowly. He peered at Harry carefully and the Denarian caught a glimpse of hesitation on the older Headmasters part. In a split second, it had gone and Dumbledore seemed to have made a decision.

"Ah well," Harry shrugged carelessly, not looking at all bothered. "So he gets a few assault and battery charges laid against him... and destruction of property too, I guess."

"Attempted murder," Dumbledore supplied. "You apparently tried to cast a Killing Curse at somebody."

"Well, Meciél wouldn't let me kill anybody so I had to be inventive," Harry explained. "Anyway, he's killed thirteen people already. He'll get over these little crimes sooner or later."

"Do you know one of the people he is convicted of murdering was a wizard named Peter Pettigrew?" Dumbledore asked, as if imparting a great secret that Harry was not privy too.

"Did you know that seven people died in penguin attacks this century?" Harry supplied and gave a sarcastic grin. "Isn't it great? We're both masters of useless information."

“Peter Pettigrew is also known as Wormtail, a prominent Death Eater that I believe you’ve already met,” Dumbledore continued.

Harry stilled, his smile suddenly becoming bland but his eyes glinting. Anger rushed at him, anger and a need for vengeance as he absently fingered the faint scar over his face. He knew Wormtail- it was his visions that he kept seeing.

“Wormtail,” he said mildly, as if he were discussing the weather. “One day I’m going to have to kill that man in an excruciatingly painful manner.”

“Sirius is an innocent man, Harry, and a valued member of my Order,” Dumbledore said gravely. “The people he is accused of murdering were all slain by Peter’s wand. You have just made it harder for him to clear his name.”

“So?” Harry scoffed carelessly. “That’s not my problem.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said quietly and steepled his fingers, staring at Harry over his glasses. “Is that how you truly feel?”

“I thought I told you, Dumbledore,” Harry started, rolling his eyes as he lifted himself from his seat. “I only care about a few people in this miserable little world. I’m one of them, Muriel’s the other and Black will find himself nowhere on the list.”

“That’s a very heartless attitude,” Dumbledore noted quietly, remaining in his seat.

“It’s a realistic attitude,” Harry disagreed with a snort. “And it’s helped me stay on top of things for the last seven years.” He folded his arms and gave Dumbledore a challenging look. “Was there anything else or can I go now? I have Transfiguration and McGonagall is pulling the ‘I’m cranky because nothing with a respectable dick size will sleep with me’ routine. Really, it’s getting old.”

“A little respect will go a long way, Harry,” Dumbledore said with wearied resignation.

"You have my respect, Dumbledore," Harry said bluntly and smiled thinly. "You've earned it. Nobody else here has."

Harry turned and strode across the room to open the door. Just as he was about to descend the staircase, Dumbledore's voice drifted forward and halted him in his tracks.

"From this moment on, as long as you are a member of this institution, you will not be allowed to set foot off these premises," he said severely, his voice brooking no argument. "I will adjust the wards accordingly. We are allies, Harry. Allies need to work together and cooperate."

"Let's just hope that Voldemort and Vesper have a relationship as 'good' as ours," Harry retorted sarcastically without turning around. "If they do, they'll be at each other's throats already. Hell, maybe they'll off each one another for us."

"I sincerely doubt that," Dumbledore remarked dryly.

"Oh, don't be a paedophile," Harry muttered and took a few steps down, before pausing. He turned his head and called back, "Pessimist. I meant pessimist, honestly."

After his meeting with Dumbledore, Harry had both Transfiguration and then Charms. Amanda sat down by his side as usual and for once Harry didn't mind, quite content to be peering at her work to help him get a grip on his own. Sure, he knew over two-dozen different ways to kill a man with his wand but for the life of him, he couldn't even fathom how to use a switching spell. Still, McGonagall had been reluctantly impressed with his progress, especially considering that he had been having problems trying to transfigure a match to a needle last year, and she declared him to be more or less equal to a well-rounded fifth year, maybe even slightly ahead of most of them.

Charms had been a little bit of a bother for Harry. Unlike Transfiguration, Harry hadn't been practising any schoolyard charms. Sure, he did know a few household spells, mainly to wash his dishes and sweep the dust off his summoning circle (because any flaws

could have resulted in a loose demon or faery and Harry really hadn't wanted to chase, or be chased by, a hyperactive Cess yet again) but that was about it. This was why Harry spent the majority of Charms staring dully at the blackboard as Professor Flitwick instructed the class in some kind of advanced expanding charm.

'Come on,' Harry thought dully, his head resting on his open palms. Sitting on his desk, Meciél's illusion glanced down at him and cocked her head. 'You're not bored or anything?'

"Knowledge is power," Meciél said simply. "You need not pay attention but I shall. I know that you can't cast any of these spells."

'Do you know that I don't want to?' Harry thought derisively, staring around the class as the students continually flicked their wands, their faces scrunched up in concentration as they murmured Latin incantations. 'I'll file these charms as 'spells I want to use in battle when I want to be killed or kicked in the face'.'

Of all of the students, only Hermione was making any kind of progress, sticking her entire arm into a small pouch no bigger than a wallet with a pleased expression on her face. When she caught his eye, however, she huffed and glanced away. She had chosen to sit next to Amanda, who had chosen to sit next to Harry.

"What's your problem?" Harry grunted, lazing back in his chair and looking extremely relaxed. "Is this about Krum?"

"Don't say his name," Hermione hissed over the general din of the classroom. Amanda, stuck between the two, looked extremely awkward as the two spoke over her head.

"Why not?" Harry asked and smiled as Hermione's face flickered with anger. Malicious amusement rushed through him as he continued, lowering his voice until it was barely a whisper. "Here, I'll say it again. Krum. Krum is Krum. Krum tried to cheat me out of the cup. Krum was killed by a Death Eater. I don't particularly give a shit that Krum died..."

“How dare...” Hermione started, her voice rising up into a shrill as she levelled his wand at him. But Harry’s wand was suddenly in his hand and despite his relaxed state, he looked extremely confident as he stared Hermione down with an amused smile.

“Hermione,” Amanda hissed, shooting Harry a reproachful glare. “He didn’t mean it. Lower your wand.” Hermione was shaking but she lowered her arm down as Amanda whispered soothing words into her ear. “He’s insensitive...he’s dealing with it in his own way...c’mon, would Viktor want you to act like this...that’s it....that’s better...”

‘Can you imagine her in a fight?’ Harry thought idly, twirling his wand in his right hand. A few crimson and black sparks shot out and Amanda, frowning as she flicked her wand, gave a yelp as one of them grazed her arm, turning her wounded expression onto Harry for a few moments, before sighing and turning away. ‘It’ll be like ‘Oh, wait, please Mr. Death Eater, I’m going to cast an expansion charm on you...now just wait one minute, the Killing Curse is illegal...how dare you try to kill me...you have some nerve...’

“Do you ever listen to yourself speak?” Meciell asked with wry amusement and Harry shrugged, ignoring Amanda as she turned back to him with a pointed expression on her face.

“I try not to,” he muttered out loud.

It was after Charms that Harry, with vestiges of Dumbledore’s conversation flittering through his mind, decided to skip lunch and take a closer look at the books that Dumbledore had given him. Waving a slightly disappointed Amanda off, Harry strolled through the hallways and approached the Gryffindor Tower. Malfoy was heading another way with two large, extremely ugly boys flanking him, but before the alabaster-skinned boy could say anything, Harry had cut him off.

“You know, Malfoy, after meeting you I’ve decided that I’m in favour of abortion in cases of incest,” Harry said cheerfully, not even missing a beat as he strolled past the gaping Slytherin. Malfoy blinked in surprise and stared as Harry turned a corner, his voice growing more and more distant. “I guess I’m in favour of abortion altogether, so go

doctors, use your rusty coat hangers and kick the crap out of the little foetuses...”

A few minutes later, Harry sprawled out on his newly appointed bed in the Gryffindor Tower and picked up one of the ancient-looking tomes that Dumbledore had given him. He idly flicked to a random page, his eyebrows rising and a distinctively impressed expression crossing his face as he saw several interesting and powerful spells flying on the pages. A crudely sketched hand made very slow movement in the right hand corner while there were rows of writing scrawled to the left. There seemed to be two distinct styles, one had been written in a loopy scrawl and the other in block print. Some of the writing was a description for the spell, while others seemed to pertain to the advanced magical theory behind it. Advanced Arithmancy equations sprung out at him, making absolutely no sense to him whatsoever.

“Fiendfyre, the Transmogrifian Torture Curse....what’s this, Necromancy?” Harry mumbled to himself, his eyes raking over the heading. “How to create an Inferius...”

“A type of zombie, I believe,” Meciél said, her illusion suddenly appearing as she perched over his shoulder, looking at the pages with interest. “They are slow but resistant to many forms of magic. I believe you’d like fighting them- they absolutely hate fire.”

“Huh,” Harry grunted, flipping another page over as he browsed the book.

Excitement and anticipation arose within him. It was as if Dumbledore had just handed him, a small child, the keys to the toy store- a store that housed real flamethrowers. The pages seemed to be never-ending and he saw more and more potentially devastating spells. Not all seemed to be combat orientated; there were some wards and defensive spells that he had never seen before. Words such as Anti-Apparation, Repulsion and Fidelius sprang out at him. There were sections on self-transfiguration, ward-breaking, conjuration, advanced animation, spells to conceal yourself, spells to conceal others, spells to mend bones, dull pain and even replace limbs. There was a large section on ancient runes of old, a section that Meciél scoffed at, partly

because of her derision of such archaic forms of magic and partly because she had been ancient herself when these runes had been invented. Harry flipped to the back of the book and saw an immense section on advanced Arithmancy, small, faded writing detailing the technical aspects of spell-casting; how incantations and wand movements affected magic and so forth.

“Of everything here, this is the most useful,” Meciél murmured, her eyes narrowed as she literally committed everything Harry saw to her vast memory. Harry could feel her working through the contents of the page at that moment and flipped it over, allowing her to memorise that one as well, then the next, and the next.

“I dunno,” Harry muttered, flicking back to the page entitled ‘Fiendfyre’. “This looks pretty cool.”

“Once I have deciphered the Arithmancy, there is a good chance that I can begin designing and creating spells for you,” Meciél said, looking almost gleeful at the prospect. Her silver eyes danced and she placed a warm hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I will admit, beloved, I have a few good ideas already.”

“Of course you do,” Harry muttered absently as he flicked through the pages. He was at page number nine hundred and something before he finally reached the end, a blank page marred only by a furious signature of ‘AD + GG’.

The book was a treasure trove of knowledge- one that seemed to have been partly written in the same loopy writing that Harry had seen in Dumbledore’s office. His respect and wariness for the man grew even further as he turned back to the middle of the book, opening it up at a random page.

“I’m impressed,” Meciél murmured. “Dumbledore is bound to know everything written in this book and, by the looks of it, seems to have contributed quite a bit to its creation.”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s awesome,” Harry muttered distractedly, suddenly focussed on a page that dealt with alchemy. The idea of a

philosopher's stone was suddenly buzzing in his mind and a shrewd smile crossed his lips. Unlimited gold...

"Remember to be careful," Meciél warned quietly and Harry blinked, turning his head and staring up at the illusion that was perched on his pillows. She looked both serious and thoughtful. "Dumbledore has given you this information for a reason. There is nothing selfless behind his motives because nobody is selfless. There's a reason he wants you to know this?"

"Blackmail?" Harry hazarded a guess, but frowned. "Nah, he doesn't need to give me this for that. He knows a lot about me already."

"He wants you to become stronger," Meciél mused quietly, brushing down the wrinkles in her silver and white robes.

"Because we're both enemies against Voldemort?" Harry offered hesitantly, shifting on his four-poster bed.

"Possible," Meciél admitted carefully, looking thoughtful. "He could be forging you into a potent weapon against his enemy."

"Our enemy," Harry reminded wryly.

"He could be passing his knowledge to you as his successor," Meciél said but her lips twitched when Harry snorted loudly. "Although I doubt it."

"Who cares about his intentions right now?" Harry dismissed and turned back to the book, a greedy look in his eyes as he poured over a potentially devastating spell that had once been used to crucify the enemies of the Romans. "This book is better than gold...hey, do you think that this spell would be sacrilegious?"

"Always so eager to rush into things," Meciél murmured fondly, smoothing back his hair with a warm hand as Harry pulled his wand from his robes with a speculative look on his face.

"I'll leave patience to you," Harry said with a hint of a smile. "Seeing as how you're so good at it."

“Do you really think so?” Meciél asked.

“Well, I’m not dead yet,” Harry said wryly.

“Point taken.”

A/N: Hey everybody. Here's chapter 15, which people from DLP might know as one that went through several different revisions and whatnot before being decided. At one point, half of it was an epic omake that nuhuh had written for me but several people voiced their concerns over it and it was decided that it might be easier to leave it out for the time being. Still, cheers for nuhuh...

This is the last chapter for at least eight days- I'm going interstate and my access to a PC will generally be limited in that I won't get a lot of time to write. I hope you all have a Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year, etc, etc, and without anything else, I urge you to enjoy this chapter.

Albus adjusted the half-moon glasses so they settled on the bridge of his crooked nose and regarded the large bundle of scrolls on his cluttered desk with an expression of wry amusement and inexhaustible patience. Had his younger self ever glimpsed such a tedious future, Albus knew that he would have gone completely mad, yet the older wizard took comfort in the comfortable and familiar ritual. It brought out dedication and patience- traits Albus sought out. The familiar twinkle in his cerulean eyes unconsciously dimmed as his mind wandered back all those years ago, to a furious duel between three powerful wizards, to an innocent witch and beloved sister who got caught up in business that was sadly far too complex for her to understand.

With a slight shake of his head, Albus withdrew from his past with nothing more than a soft sigh and an absent stroke to his long beard. Those times were over and he had done his best to atone for his sins over the years. He picked one of the scrolls up and studied the small, tightly-packed scrawl. It only took him a mere glance to understand what Argus wanted and, with a flourish of his wand, etched on a firm 'X'. He remembered when he had come through Hogwarts and had been whipped and would not wish that on any child.

Well, perhaps not anychild. There was one that could at times aggravate him far beyond what anybody else had ever managed. The Weasley twins had their own charm despite their mischievousness, as had the Marauders back in the seventies and the Pranklets in the

fifties, but none of them had ever shown the undesirable qualities that Harry Potter revelled in. What was worse, Albus was torn between in his responsibility to see the world as peaceful as possible. On one hand, Harry Potter was quite literally a demon, a master of Hellfire with potent abilities in the darker aspects of magic. On the other hand, Harry was the prophesised one- the only one who could defeat a newly reborn and far more dangerous Voldemort. Perhaps Meciél was the power that the prophecy spoke of?

From her gleaming golden perch, Fawkes let out a soft, comforting trill and Albus gave a gentle smile, regarding the phoenix with fondness in his eyes. He had several regrets in his life, Arianna's death, his reckless youth and his inability to have a family, but they were washed away with the presence of his faery companion. Fawkes was his family now and he never regretted his bargain, although he had wondered on more than one occasion what would have happened if he hadn't met her. When he had confronted Gellert all those years ago, he had been unaware of just how far his old friend had fallen. Without the timely bargain with Fawkes, Albus knew without a doubt that he would have died and the Wizarding World would be a far different place than it was today. Who knows, perhaps it might even be better?

Fawkes let out another trill, a haunting series of notes that would make no sense to anybody except the elderly Headmaster, who interpreted the flow of music as something along the lines of 'pointless musings help nobody'.

"Perhaps," Albus conceded quietly, leaning back in the chair and gazing into the fireplace. "However, reflection can often lead to the most startling of discoveries."

Fawkes trilled again, a light-hearted sigh of a being that had argued this very point many times over the decades and always lost. She regarded Albus with wise and utterly inhuman black eyes, seeing into his very being in a way that nobody else ever could. Albus felt her stare and his face creased into a soft smile as he watched the gentle fire crackle on a small pile of logs- he had always enjoyed a natural fire over a magical fire. Not like Harry, of course, whose duelling

strategies always seemed to run along the lines of conjuring magical flame, the more the better, and throwing it at other people.

And he was back on the topic of Harry once again.

To be fair, Albus had noted, both from interviewing young Nymphadora and his own scrying spells into the abandoned classroom that Harry had deemed as his personal training centre (Really, did the young Denarian honestly think that Albus wouldn't notice? He had gone to some trouble to keep Hogwarts extensive wards from banishing Harry from the school), that Harry had drastically improved his duelling technique. He had also noted from the reports of his Professor's that he was generally keeping himself in check in his classes. He had received no more complaints from Severus, although he would have been extremely disappointed if he had after giving the rather stern lecture to the tall Head of Slytherin, and the worst feedback he received was that Harry rarely paid attention in the more mundane lessons (something Albus he could empathise with- he recalled feeling the same way almost one hundred and forty years ago).

Without Harry, Voldemort would not fall. However, the more skill that Harry obtained, the harder it would be to keep him from hurting somebody truly innocent. There had been times when Albus felt a pang of regret at handing over the grimoire that both he and Gellert had complied. A demonically possessed Harry Potter wielding Fiendfyre was something that sent shivers up his spine. At the moment, Harry possessed a somewhat questionable moral code, but how long would that last under the constant assault of a demon and temptress? Would future generations forgive him for arming a menace that could potentially be far worse than Voldemort?

Still, Albus owed today's generations the chance to live in freedom- and he owed Lily and James Potter, who had he failed once before. Harry needed to live, both so Voldemort could be killed and so Albus could expunge his conscience and start afresh. Despite Harry's odd charm (although not many would consider Harry to be amiable in any way or form), Albus knew that he would do what was necessary in the future if Harry were to take a turn for the worse- even if he didn't want to...

“This is so fucking awesome,” Harry exclaimed exuberantly, a wide grin stretched across his face. His eyes, glinting with dark power, were narrowed in concentration as he stood in the abandoned set of classrooms that had once again become his home away from home, allowing him to develop and practise his budding skills.

Over the past few weeks, Harry had spent more and more time delving into the thick, seemingly never-ending grimoire of wand-magic that Dumbledore had so kindly given to him, trying to decipher and comprehend just what it was he was reading about. For most wizards, it would have been hard- there was a reason why students were just given books and told to read everything- but luckily Harry had something on his side that everybody else lacked.

Meciel almost devoured everything that was thrown at her and several times, Harry reluctantly gave up control of his body to allow her to pursue some advanced arithmancy that, frankly, he couldn't make heads or tails out of. The first few days saw very little progress but over time, Meciel and Harry had begun to work through the technical aspect of the book and focus on the more practical solutions.

Hence, this was why Harry was currently holding his wand aloft, watching with nothing less than sheer delight as a abnormally blazing flock of dark flame moulded into the shape of crows. It was far less impressive that the gigantic looming serpent of fiendfyre that Voldemort was so fond of using, but considering that Harry could barely control a single 'bird' a week ago, he felt as if he were making progress. The fiendfyre tugged at his wand, almost as if the dark magic fuelling the powerful flames was alive and wishing to break free from its restraints, but Harry kept the cursed fire under his control and directed the flock of fiery crows around the room. Heat and smoke pushed at him and Harry flicked his wand, dispelling the cursed flame with a wide grin on his face.

“Do we have a new favourite spell, now?” Meciel's illusion asked wryly, a single eyebrow rising as she sat on one of the various crumpled and shattered desks lying around the room- victims of Harry's ever-growing repertoire of spells.

"You bet," Harry said with a grin, sniffing the air and heaving a great sigh. "Ah, you smell that? There's nothing like the smell of napalm in the morning."

"Firstly, this is Fiendfyre, not napalm," Meciél said wryly, her silver eyes dancing with amusement. She smoothed down the front of her dress, a silver and white piece of clothing that was fashionable in ages gone past.

"You easily could call this magical napalm," Harry protested absently, flicking his wand and repairing two of the splintered desks- a result from his previous Charm essay (which had given him a cramped hand, a bad attitude and a weeks of detentions after he kicked over a suit of amour in frustration)

"And secondly, I distinctly recall you hearing that in a movie," Meciél finished.

"Quite possible," Harry said, shrugging the comment off with a dismissive wave of his hand. "But I can't be expected to remember this sort of stuff. That's what I've got you for."

"I'm glad I'm appreciated," Meciél said dryly. She gestured at the table with a slim, pale hand and motioned for Harry to continue. "Now, insculpo, if you will."

Harry gave a short, elegant swish of his wand, his wrist moving with far more elegance than he was used to. The tip of his wand buzzed softly and sheets of magic crackled at the tip as an invisible force lanced at, slashing at the newly remade desk and leaving a very fine but very deep gouge in the wood, as if it had been made by a scalpel rather than a sword.

"I don't like this spell," he grumbled, although he felt a pang of satisfaction as the desk groaned and split into two, collapsing to the ground with a loud clutter.

"This spell is quite capable of piercing magical or physical shields that the Effodiocannot," Meciél explained patiently, as if she had been over this a dozen times already. "Furthermore, it is essentially silent

when cast correctly- and I don't need to tell you that that could be very useful for us in the future."

"There's no flash to it," Harry grumbled, though it was more out of habit than any genuine disgruntlement. He waved his wand, repairing the desk again. "No buzz, no loud claps of thunder, no bright flashes of light."

"Sometimes it is better that way," Meciell said simply. She gestured at the desk again. "Now, let's see if we can avoid producing any sparks and light. The book indicates that one truly proficient with this spell will produce neither noise nor light. I've studied the arithmantic equation and it appears that if you variate the fluctuating wand-magic, you can..."

"Meciell," Harry said sharply and Meciell blinked. "Just tell me what to do."

"Twist your wrist a few more degrees to the left and lengthen the swish by approximately three and a half centimetres," Meciell said amusedly, rolling her eyes good naturedly.

"See, isn't that so much easier?" Harry asked and turned back. He swished his wand again and although the tip buzzed again, it was almost undetectable and the sparks were fewer. The desk was once again cleaved sliced in half and fell clattering to the ground.

"I try to tell you what to do but you make it oh so hard, beloved," Meciell remarked, the smile on her face more affectionate than annoyed. Harry grinned but gave a sigh as she narrowed her eyes, an oddly human gesture that had no real bearing other than making the illusion looking as realistic as possible. "See the small pile of sawdust? That indicates that the slice was not as precise as it should have been."

"Can we go back to Fiendfyre again?" Harry sighed.

"We could work on your sword practise," Meciell offered and Harry shuddered, his eyes flickering to the sheathed cane lying inconspicuously on one of the desks behind him. "Of course, I have

never had a host who wielded a Japanese katana before, so it would be mostly trial and error for the more advanced techniques.”

“I can’t believe they made one of the swords of the cross into Jap-crap,” Harry said disgustedly. His legs were still aching after he had stumbled on one of the parrying moves he had become fond of when using his other sword. Apparently there was a big difference between a straight and a curved blade, and Harry was seriously considering reworking the blade into something more useable for Meciél’s experiences.

“As long as the other person is not proficient with melee weapons then your standard point-and-jab should work,” Meciél remarked.

“Why is it always the swords or the axes or the staffs that are magically powerful?” Harry asked sourly. “For once, I’d just like somebody to invent a magic gun. It would be so much easier on everybody. Point, aim, shoot, die, reload. Five simple steps- well, four for me, the other guy only needs to learn how to die.”

“Mhm,” Meciél said absently, not even looking at Harry as she glanced over at the open grimoire on the table next to him.

If Meciél had really been sitting there then she wouldn’t have been able to read it. However, Harry had a partial view of it in his peripheral vision and no doubt Meciél had tapped into that and was focussing it on the words.

“If God was all-powerful, then why didn’t he get the Pope or whoever to make holy gun,” Harry wondered, idly flicking his wand and blasting one of the desks into pieces with a thunderous boom.

“There were only three nails,” Meciél said and looked extremely amused as she glanced up at Harry. “Bullets are disposable and I do not believe Jesus will come down and willingly crucify himself again so that you can kill some vampires at a distance.”

“I said gun,” Harry said pointedly.

"A gun is only the mechanism that fires the true weapon," Meciél said. "It is the actual bullet that penetrates flesh, not the gun itself. The most you could do with a holy gun is beat somebody over the head with it, and frankly, it's a lot easier to do that with a sword."

"Not with this Jap-crap," Harry said, wrinkling his nose as he gestured at the sheathed sword.

Meciél smiled, but cocked her head a second later, as if she was listening for something that Harry wasn't able to hear just yet. Distaste flickered over her face. "Ah. Your protégé is here."

"What?" Harry frowned but Meciél's illusion had vanished and he turned around as a loud click hit his ears and the door slowly opened. "Oh, it's just you."

"Well, who did you think it was?" Amanda asked sharply as she walked into the room, unceremoniously thumping her satchel-bag on the ground with a scowl on her face. Harry blinked at her tone, idly noting that she was rubbing the back of her hand.

"Oh, I don't know," Harry answered, waving his wand through the air and sending several desks and chairs to opposite ends of the room. "A professor, a student, an Auror, a Death Eater, the Easter Bunny, Jesus..."

"Ha, ha, very funny," Amanda muttered, but a smile was tugging at her lips and she rolled her eyes good-naturedly, moving forward to stand next to Harry and peering at one of the ruined desks curiously. "Do I want to know how you did that?"

"If I say yes, will you learn the spell?" Harry asked shrewdly.

"No," Amanda said, still smiling as she turned to face Harry. She brushed her blonde hair out of her eyes and exhaled loudly. "So what am I learning today?"

"A modified mix of a large scale summoning and banishing charm," Harry answered promptly and enjoyed the look of puzzlement that flickered across Amanda's face.

"I have no idea what you just said," Amanda declared flatly, although her interested had been peaked.

"This is what the normal version does," Harry said and turned his wand into the middle of the room. With a broad gesture, almost as if he was beckoning somebody to come towards him, he swished his wand and incanted "Scindo Vellere!"

Six desks from various corners in the room flew into the air and, grasped by Harry's spell, soared into the middle, clattering and slamming into each other in a wave of noise. With another flick of his wand and a mutter of 'Scindo Diremi' Harry banished all but one of the desks back to where they had started- although some of them looked a little worse for wear.

"That seems...useful," Amanda said, although she sounded a little disappointed.

"It can be," Harry agreed, ignoring her tone. "Think about it. A Death Eater is walking through your kitchen and you decide to mass-summon a group of steak knives right into his chest. You'd need to be creative, though this isn't the spell I was talking about. If you angle your wrist a little to the right, narrow the field of the spell and you have this."

This time, Harry directed the spell at a single desk. The desk shuddered and a loud groaning noise filled the air. Visible dents appeared in the surface, each widening as they pulled away from each other, until the magical forces ripped the desk apart in a shower of flying debris. The torn, splintered desk collapsed to the ground, probably unfixable by magic.

"You're basically summoning or banishing a single object and the stress will just tear it apart," Harry said casually. "You can make things implode or explode, depending on whether you banish or summon, though it's better to 'summon' when you're trying it on human beings. The results are much more effective and...fun."

"I'm sure it is," Amanda muttered, looking at the desk and biting her lip.

"It'd be a lot easier to use a more focussed curse though," Harry said and raised an eyebrow, looking amused. "I don't suppose you'd like to learn some better ones? Effodio is good and Exturbo Arduro has great stopping power. Irruptus Ardor and Evertoxuro are a little less potent, but they're a lot better when dealing with multiple targets. Siagrus and Laedo fervefacio might be a little too advanced for you, but they're good ones to keep in mind."

"Whoa," Amanda uttered after a moment's pause. She peered at Harry with a cheeky grin on her face. "Are you sure you're not obsessed with curses or anything?"

"Maybe a little," Harry conceded and thumped himself on the chest, looking quite pleased. "But I'm still standing, aren't I? Of course, that could be because of my incredible good looks and charm..."

"I'll pass on learning those spells, thanks," Amanda answered, rolling her eyes with exasperation. "I don't think the others would like it when I started teaching them overt dark magic. They were a little wary over Plecto and Niteo tutaminis, and they're technically okay."

"You're still teaching the others what you learn in here, then?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow. Amanda nodded.

"Some of them didn't like the fact that they're so painful," Amanda said and added dryly, "it makes it hard to get them to practise with each other. Hey, you don't think you could focus on some OWL level spells?"

"You mean the ones that are as weak as piss?" Harry asked and scoffed as Amanda winced.

"Yeah, those ones," she muttered, ducking her head. "Some of them just want to pass the OWL's and you're not really covering anything that might be covered on the exam."

“Not a chance in hell,” Harry said cheerfully, turning back to the desk and prodding his wand in its general direction as he tried to repair it. “Oh, c’mon...” he muttered sourly under his breath, prodding his wand at it again. One of the pieces of wood twitched but did nothing else.

“Funny you should mention hell,” Amanda said dryly and Harry blinked, glancing up at Amanda’s challenging stare. Harry could easily see the nervousness behind the bravado and just shook his head as he made a face.

“Somebody’s getting testy,” Harry began.

“Sorry,” Amanda said and Harry sighed.

“...and there you went and ruined it,” he continued, finally giving up on repairing the desk and banishing the remains into a dark corner. “If you’re going to be testy then at least stick with it to the very end. Now, let’s see you do the spell- unmodified, to start off with.”

Amanda raised her wand and gave an awkward swipe, ‘Scindo Vellere’ spilling from her lips. One or two of the desks might have twitched but nothing else happened. Harry rolled his eyes irritably and moved in from behind. His arm snaked around and he ignored Amanda’s squeak of surprise as he roughly corrected her wrist and stance. She remained completely still, as if she was frozen to the spot, and only moved once Harry had moved back.

“Now do it,” Harry ordered.

Amanda tried again and it seemed to work a little better this time, three of the desks jumping forward with a loud clatter as if they were trying to run into the centre of the room. Harry gave a theatrical yawn and glanced down at his wrist. He paused and then frowned.

“I probably would have made my point a little better if I had a watch on,” he confided, lifting up his arm and revealing a bare wrist.

Amanda wasn't looking at him though. Her gaze was riveted to the cracked and broken desk and suddenly she was biting her lip, looking hesitant and wary.

"This can be used to kill, can't it?" She asked, although she looked as if she already knew that answer. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. This was a question that he heard every time she learnt a new spell.

"Of course it can," Harry scoffed, looking annoyed. He gestured to the broken desk impatiently. "Does that look like the result of a stunning charm?"

"There's no need to snap," Amanda retorted irritably. "I just don't want to kill anybody."

"Listen brat," Harry said, leaning forward to emphasise his point. Amanda leaned back, looking uncomfortable at his close proximity. "Every spell can be used to kill somebody, every spell. It just depends on how creative you are."

"Every spell," Amanda repeated slowly.

"Yep," Harry said, nodding vigorously. He turned back to the centre of the room and flicked his wand, banishing the desks and tables back to their proper positions. "Every spell." He concluded.

"What about the...cheering charm," Amanda challenged, struggling to think of the most harmless spell she had heard of.

"Keep a cheering charm on somebody for seventy-two hours and see how they like sleep deprivation," Harry retorted dryly, flinching himself into one of the seats and lounging back as he glanced up at Amanda with languid eyes. "Sleep deprivation can kill people, by the way."

"Stunning charm," Amanda offered challengingly.

"Stun somebody fifteen times and see if they can get up again," Harry responded almost easily, a wide grin stretching his face. "Please, go on."

“Petrificus Totalus,” Amanda said, looking vaguely disturbed as she too took a seat at one of the scattered chairs.

“That can cause paralysation if you’re careful,” Harry said with a wicked smile. “Or not so careful, if you get what I mean.”

“Levitation- wait,” Amanda trailed off, mumbling something under her breath and shaking her head. She brushed her hair out of her eyes, biting her lip in thought. “...um...summoning charm?”

“You could summon something sharp and split their brains open,” Harry said and his eyes went a little distant. “I did that once, actually. It was kinda fun...”

“I was thinking of summoning a heart of something and...” Amanda trailed off, looking quite disturbed and fidgeting in her seat as Harry gave her a brilliant smile.

“Good thinking,” he declared and Amanda flushed, her eyes flicking with a variety of different conflicting emotions. This was quickly replaced with indignation as he continued brusquely, “If you were a moron, of course.

“It could work!” Amanda protested, although it seemed to be an automatic reaction rather than any genuine disagreement.

“No, it couldn’t and here’s why,” Harry said, looking far too smug than Amanda liked.

“I presume you’re about to teach me something now?” Amanda muttered under her breath, but she unconsciously leant forward, listening intently as Harry started to speak.

“Every living thing is resistant to wand-magic,” Harry began. “Some are more resistant than others. Wizards are a lot more resistant to wand-magic than Muggles are, for example, but regardless, some resistance exists- probably because it doesn’t exist in this realm and there’s conflict with the natural forces and whatever.”

"We're resistant?" Amanda echoed slowly, digesting the concept rather than actually questioning it.

"We are," Harry said briskly and rolled his eyes. "Look, the human body can cop a lot of magical shit thrown at it and still survive, especially the average wand-wizard who has very little power behind them."

"What's your point?" Amanda asked and Harry narrowed his eyes. He stared at her until she flushed and ducked her grey eyes down to her lap. Feeling pleased, Harry continued.

"My point is that you can't summon a heart or any internal organ out of the body like that," Harry concluded. "Magical resistance won't let the spell work and there's only so much power you can push into a close-ranged summoning charm. It's why this spell here will tear through wooden desks but cast on a wizard, will crack a few bones and cause some internal damage- unless you're careful."

"Huh," Amanda uttered after a moment's beat. Despite her hair colour, Harry had assessed that she was above average in matters of magic and was sure that she would get it eventually. But there was something else that was bugging him...

"You know, you've been getting a bit of an attitude problem lately," Harry noted and blinked as Amanda's face flushed, her eyes brewing with anger.

"Umbridge," Amanda spat out in a tone Harry had never heard before. "She doesn't like me and insists on giving me detentions every single lesson!"

"She doesn't like anybody," Harry said carelessly, leaning back in his chair and propping his feet up on one of the desks. "Or so I've seen."

"Like you'd know," Amanda's voice was sharp, curt and full of a mixture between resentment and...was that hurt Harry could hear? "You just spend the entire time sitting at the back of the class with a stupid grin on your face. I'm the one copping the detentions. You could at least help me out or something."

"Is she using a quill that uses blood instead of ink?" Harry asked and Amanda looked startled, blinking and staring at him in surprise.

"Well, yeah," she said slowly. She scowled. "I told McGonagall and she yelled at Umbridge but then she just pulled out another one of those damned educational degrees the next morning."

"I could teach you a few spells that might put a damper on Umbridge's little reign of terror if you want," Harry offered and grinned malicious.

"Do you ever give up?" Amanda asked after a moments beat, both with exasperation, as if the constant offers of dark magic annoyed her, and resignation, as if she knew Harry wouldn't stop.

"In a word- no," Harry uttered with a cheery grin. "Well, it looks like I'll have to do something about her then. Just know that when she's dead, it'll be all your fault. If only you had cursed her arm to give her a massive bitch-slap every time she clears her throat...hmm, I wonder if that's possible."

Amanda rolled her eyes and sighed loudly, but there was a reluctant grin tugging at the corner of her lips. She watched as Harry stood, extracting his well-polished wand from his robes.

"Okay, I get that you don't want to learn the spells, but what about watching?" Harry tried with a twinkle in his eye. He gestured to his wand and gave her a mischievously dark smile. "Do you wanna see something cool?"

"...yeah," Amanda said slowly and stood up, watching Harry carefully. "But don't try anything, Harry, I mean it."

"Oh, I won't," Harry said distractedly. "Now, what I'm about to show you is a form of cursed fire- a potent piece of dark magic called Fiendfyre. Frankly, it's the best thing to come out since the Effodiocurse..."

The first thing that he had noticed about the place was that it smelled...grubby dirt, human sweat, the inevitable dust that would

appear no matter how many charms you put down...but he had been given a mission by his master and he would obey. He scurried forward, trying with all of his might to suppress the animalistic instincts to flee from the giant predator slithering forward by his side.

Suddenly there was another smell, a very familiar smell that he recognised almost instantly. He had lived amongst this smell for twelve years and dread gripped his tiny heart. As much as he feared and obeyed his Master, he did not wish death upon the man that had helped shelter him...but suddenly the snake by his side lurched forward, also aware of the single guard.

There was a muttered word and suddenly a bright cone of light filled the hallway. He got a glimpse of a balding man, with red hair and a kind face with an upraised wand, before the snake attacked and suddenly the man was screaming and twitching, blood gushing from his wound. The snake fell back, satisfied, and Wormtail shuddered in his rat form, unable to drive away the strong scent of blood from his superior nostrils...

Harry's eyes flipped open as the smell of freshly spilt blood lingered in his nostrils. Far from concerned, Harry gave a loud yawn and rubbed his sleepy eyes. It was almost painful to open them and he flopped back in his bed.

"Oh, for the love of..." Harry mumbled groggily.

'Go back to sleep, beloved,' Meciél whispered in his mind, sounding as if she had just been woken up from sleep- or whatever it was that Fallen angels did instead- as well.

"Bloody gits," Harry muttered, ignoring Meciél and hopping out of bed. He put on his shoes with an absent swipe of his wand. "Who gets bitten by a snake these days?"

'Obviously, this man,' Meciél murmured dryly, giving herself the mental equivalent of rubbing one's eyes. 'And viewed through the eyes of Wormtail, well, it seems as if Voldemort is up to something.'

“Do you think Dumbledore will pay me for this?” Harry wondered out loud, before he sighed and left the dormitory, preparing to tell Dumbledore that (presumably) one of his people had been attacked.

A/N: Heya all, this is the next chapter of Denarian Knight, well long overdue. Christmas, New Years and then just general stuffing around delayed it somewhat. This chapter is half getting the Sirius issue out of the way and half trying to explain Harry's beliefs. We know he's an asshole, yeah, but this is more at why he's an asshole.

Now, with regards to further updates, I'm letting you know that once a chapter is done, it will first be posted on a site called PatronusCharm(dot)net at least a day in advance to me posting it on Feel free to head over there and have a look.

From the moment Harry had informed Dumbledore what he had seen, it had been a whirlwind of fast-paced movement, hysterical talking and a few snappish comments as Harry was carted away from Hogwarts (Dumbledore feeling the need to remove the ones that kept Harry restricted to the castle).

As night passed into early morning, Harry found himself sitting at the kitchen table of one of the gloomiest houses he had ever seen the next morning, poking at a bowl of dried cereal with disinterest. From what he had seen, the place could have easily passed as a haunted house in any amusement park in the world, with its ominous atmosphere, large, dusty rooms and the row of distorted heads (which, Harry had to admit, was also kinda cool). But the novelty of the house wore off soon.

Harry poked at his food again and frowned. Apparently it was the Weasley Mum was the one who did most of the cooking around the dump, but she had carted herself and her flock of brats off to the wizard hospital to see the fool of a husband/father who had gotten bitten by a snake.

'So this is the headquarters of the Order of Phoenix,' Meciell mused within his head, and Harry felt her taking a detailed analysis of everything he saw for future reference. 'I will admit, it is not what I expected.'

"The heads were cool," Harry said, taking a spoonful of cereal and shoving it into his mouth. His face scrunched up in disgust and he

dropped his spoon with a loud clatter. Despite Meciél's manipulations to his taste buds, the mere feel of the probably six-month-old cereal was enough to make him lose his appetite.

'If you're into that sort of thing,' Meciél murmured, just as footsteps could be heard from the hallway outside.

Harry looked up as the door opened, his bored expression never changing as a tall, gangly man, who looked as if he had been half-starved at one point, walked in. His eyes, hollow and dull, met Harry's and a wide smile broke over his face. The smile was a little unnerving, even to Harry, and it looked as if the man was slightly unhinged. After a few moments, the man ran a hand through his long, shaggy dark hair and visibly calmed himself down.

"Hello Harry," the man said quietly. He was fidgeting on his feet as Harry inspected him, absently noting that the man's wand was tucked into his left pocket and the robes he was wearing was absent of any bumps that might signify weapons.

"Hi," Harry said in a bored tone, quite disinterested in getting to know anybody here. As much as he hated being at Hogwarts, the beds there were just great and he was missing his at these early hours of the morning.

"I...um...was a friend of James and Lily," the man said, his face scrunching up into a reflexive wince and sadness passing through his hollow eyes.

"Who?" Harry asked and the man gaped at him, looking dumbstruck.

"Your parents, Lily and James Potter," he repeated slowly, eying Harry strangely. "Don't tell me you've never heard of them."

"Oh, that Lily and James," Harry said with dawning comprehension. He gave a snort and eyed the man derisively. "Do I look like I care who you are? Go away and leave me to this crap you call breakfast." He pushed at the food with his spoon and sighed. "I just saved a man's life- you think the fuckheads could give me something a little better."

"You're a nasty little shit, aren't you?" The man responded cheerfully, his mood swinging from cautiousness to humour far quicker than what should be normal. He pulled out one of the chairs out and sitting down at the table with him.

"I try," Harry said dryly, his irritation flaring as the man placed his feet on the table with a loud thump. He narrowed his eyes and sighed. "Tell me who you are and give me three good reasons why I shouldn't turn you into frog."

"My name is Sirius Black," the man said, chuckling wryly and not looking at all disturbed by Harry's threat. "And from what I've heard, your transfiguration skills are a little lacking for that."

"Exactly," Harry muttered sourly. "That means that when I try to turn you into a frog, you could end up as half-ooze and- wait, Black!"

"Heard of me?" Sirius asked, blinking a little at Harry's sudden exclamation and the vehement expression that appeared on the younger boy's face.

"Yeah, I've heard of you," Harry said frostily and he pushed his cereal away from him. "You're the little son of a bitch that took the credit away from me when I attacked the Leaky Cauldron. You fucked up a perfectly good plan, you know."

"I can't help it what the Daily Prophet says about me," Sirius protested, eying Harry with a roguish grin. "Dumbledore told me that you had a hand in that, although he kept it quiet from everybody else. I'll warn you now; Tonks didn't take her defeat too well, so watch out for her."

'One of the Aurors

"Yeah, it'll take more than an Auror to take me down," Harry muttered then paused. His head shot up at Sirius and he was frowning, as if he were trying to place something. "Hang on, didn't you kill a whole bunch of people." He paused. "Not that I care or anything."

"That's what they said when they sent me to Azkaban," Sirius said and a bleak shadow passed over his face, making him appear much more frail and weak than usual. His eyes went distant for a few seconds, before he growled and shook his head, his good move vanishing as quickly as it had come. "But I didn't do it."

"Sure you didn't," Harry said slowly, and he gave Sirius a cheeky wink. His face sobered a moment later and he looked annoyed once again. "Okay, this was a nice chat. If you could just leave..."

"Hey, it's my house," Sirius said defensively.

"You make it sound like that's a good thing," Harry snorted, gesturing to the shabby walls

Sirius scowled angrily, but blinked and rubbed his eyes. He paused and then seemed to remember why he was there. He opened his mouth, paused, closed it, and then opened it again.

"Look, Harry," he started, looking as if he were struggling to speak. "I was...I was a very good friend of your parents...and they asked me to look after you if anything were to happen to them. Now, I'm not saying that you drop what you've got, but if you're interested in learning about your parents or....any of that stuff, I want you to know that you...you can come to me, alright?"

"For the record, I'm not interested in 'any of that stuff'," Harry said dryly, not moved at Sirius' heartfelt speech at all. He paused and regarded Sirius speculatively. "I am interested in learning how you escaped Azkaban though. That place would even give me a bit of trouble, although it did take you twelve years- not your best work, really."

"I'm an animagus," Sirius said proudly and for a moment he looked a decade younger, a wild and daring look coming into his eyes.

'Animagus- a wizard who can change into an animal,' Meciell explained quietly.

'Thanks for telling me something I already knew,' Harry muttered.

"I became one with your father, actually," the gangly man continued, a wistful smile on his face. "I was a dog- he a stag. I slipped past the Dementors when they came to feed me- they don't have real eyes, you see."

"It took you twelve years to turn into a dog?" Harry asked sceptically. He rolled his eyes and idly scratched his head.

"You know, I could teach you," Sirius offered hesitantly, ignoring Harry's barb and looking a mite awkward. "If you wanted to learn."

'I doubt you could,' Meciél said. 'My presence here has tainted a few of your natural wand-magic abilities. That said, I don't think you were ever capable of an animagus transformation to begin with.'

Harry took this in at the same time he snorted in amusement. A vision flashed through his eyes- a tiny little poodle being squashed by a demonic bone-wrym- and he shook his head in amusement.

"What's so funny?" Sirius suddenly demanded, his face flickering with annoyance and his eyes narrowing. He folded his arms over his chest.

"You wouldn't understand," Harry dismissed easily, a smile still tugging at his lips.

"Try me," Sirius said flatly, and Harry blinked at the man's sudden change of mood. He was looking dangerous now, radiating an air of madness that almost made Harry believe he was capable of mass-murder. Harry wasn't impressed, considering that he had killed more people than he could remember over the last eight years.

"I know all about you," Sirius said and smiled thinly. "We've met before. Remember me?"

Suddenly, the tall, skinny wizard was gone, replaced with a large dog with shaggy black fur and glinting yellow eyes. Harry narrowed his eyes, his mind racing furiously as he tried to recall where he had seen the dog before. In the end, it was Meciél who prodded him in the right direction as Sirius changed back into a human.

"The office," Harry breathed and his eyes were wide with surprise. He eyed the man carefully, his wand not too far away from his hand. "Last year."

"Yeah," Sirius said flatly, displeasure flickering over his face. "Remember when you inadvertently attacked Dumbledore with dark magic?"

"Inadvertently my arse," Harry mumbled. He raised his head and leaned back in his chair, watching Sirius closely. "What do you know?"

"Dumbledore told me everything," Sirius said quietly. "I know all about Meci.."

"Meciel," Harry corrected absently. "And? What do you think about it?"

"And..." Sirius said and paused. His eyes were conflicted, several different emotions battling for supremacy, but in the end, it was a solemn and serious look that won. "I don't care about, Harry, as long as you're happy."

"Bullshit," Harry snorted, easily seeing through the man's lies.

Sirius sighed.

"Alright," he conceded. He leaned forward and the next words came out as if he had wanted to get them off his chest for a very long time. "I care a little. I mean, Harry, it's your soul for God's sake!"

"God has no place near my soul," Harry deadpanned and grinned when Sirius rolled his eyes.

"It's something you need!" He said urgently. He slammed his hands down on the table. "Dammit, Harry, you need your soul!"

"I'm not using it," Harry said carelessly with a shrug. "So she can keep it for all I care."

"Look, I don't know about religion and all that," Sirius said, taking a deep breath and trying to calm himself down. "But won't you go to hell?"

"Probably," Harry answered easily, not looking at all upset. "But only if I die- and I'm not planning on dieing. Ever. Besides, I've got the sword- it's got to be some kind of leeway or something."

"Yeah, I heard you were one of these knights," Sirius said and scratched his head, the frustration draining from him as quickly as it had come. Harry frowned at the sudden mood swings- clearly Azkaban had loosened something that was probably meant to be screwed shut. "What does that mean for you?"

"Huh?" Harry asked, looking puzzled.

"Well, you've got the..." Sirius said slowly and paused, struggling to recall the name. "What do you call it, that coin...?"

"Denarius," Harry offered amusedly. "It's a blackened denarius."

"So you've lost your soul but now you've got the sword," Sirius summed up, frowning in thought. "Does that mean God...or whatever...is looking after you or something?"

"How the hell would I know?" snapped Harry, a touch angry. "I haven't spoken to the prick in years. I'll tell you though, Meciél thinks God is trying a redemption trick on me- yeah, like that's going to work."

"A redemption trick?" Sirius repeated slowly, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Yeah," Harry spat out. The idea still annoyed him- almost a decade after he had followed through with his rejection and God might still be trying to get him to jump back to His side of the fence again.

"I see what you think of that," Sirius noted carefully.

"Look, I don't care," Harry grumbled in annoyance. Irritation flowed through him and a small part of him was just itching to raise his wand and smite Sirius back to the damp, dark hole he had came from. "The sword is a useful weapon. It lets me do some pretty cool shit when it's not hauling my arse around trying to get me to save people- and it hasn't done that in a while. If I ever get sick of it, I know how to destroy it."

Sirius sat there in silence for a few moments while Harry pulled his cereal back towards him and took a mouthful, his face set in a perpetual scowl. After a few more moments, Sirius, with a contemplative expression, spoke up."

"If it came down to it," Sirius started and paused, frowning. "Harry, what would you choose? The sword or..." Here he tapped the side of his head meaningfully.

"What do you think?" Harry said coldly, his lip curled derisively. "Azkaban dented a few holes in that little brain of yours. Didn't it?"

"Look Harry, your parents made me your Godfather..."

"Godfather?" Harry exclaimed, a flash of real surprise flooding through him.

"Godfather, yes," Sirius repeated. He was talking in animated tones, looking far twitchier than before as he wrung his hands nervously in front of him. "I was meant to look after you if anything happened to them....

"Good job," Harry muttered in a low voice.

"...But, Merlin," Sirius continued, sighing and looking wearied. "You're making it hard, Harry."

"Why would I need you to look after me?" Harry scoffed and grinned arrogantly. He held up his wand and gave it a lazy flick. "I've gone up against Voldemort twice now, kicked his arse the first time and didn't even get hurt the second. I don't need you to look after me."

“Lily and James...” Sirius began.

A flash of pure anger shot through Harry and he was barely aware when sulphur began to cloud in his nose as he reflexively grasped Hellfire. His eyes glinted and he slammed his hand down on the table, a loud thump that shut Sirius up. He leant forward with malice in his voice.

“Fuck Lily and James,” he hissed coldly, the warm buzzing sensation of Hellfire causing blissful sensation of power to burn through him. “I am sick of hearing about them.”

Sirius gaped and Harry saw anger in the other man’s eyes. He smiled in satisfaction and pressed on unrelentingly, his voice remaining even and cold.

“I don’t know my parents. I’ve never known them and frankly, I don’t care to know them,” Harry said softly, but not sadly. He leaned back in his chair, keeping his eyes on Sirius, whose face was swirling with emotions. “They’re dead, Black. Memories are nice and all for sappy morons but not for me. I don’t need them and I never have. I have Meciél now, and she’s ten times greater than they could have ever been.”

“How dare you!” roared Sirius, his eyes ablaze with rage. He jumped to his feet, looming over Harry as if he were going to strike him, but the Denarian just smiled insolently. “How dare you insult their memory like that? They brought you into this world!”

“And the taxi brought me to the airport,” Harry replied flatly, not looking impressed with Sirius’ temper-tantrum. “But the poor Indian driver isn’t the person flying the plane, is he?”

Sirius’ face was flushed with indignant anger.

“So you would choose that demon bitch over your own parents?” Sirius snarled, and Harry’s lazy smile disappeared. “That is sick, Harry!”

"Watch your mouth, Black," Harry spat out, his eyes frosty. "I am exceptionally good at killing things."

"Your parents loved you!" Sirius ranted, pacing the kitchen with a furious expression on his face. "They cared for you!"

"Meciel loves me," Harry said, restraining the temptation to turn the man into a small pile of steaming ooze with some degree of success. Perhaps Umbridge had been teaching him a few things after all.

"She's a demon!" Sirius snapped, waving it off dismissively.

"She still loves me," Harry said frankly, and was pleased when it seemed his calm manner was better at fuelling Black's temper than anything else.

Certainly, Sirius seemed to rage for a few more moments, but he stopped and paused, taking deep breaths and staring at Harry with a heartbroken expression. His next words were delivered quietly, almost too quietly for Harry to hear properly.

"Is that enough for you then?"

"More than enough," Harry answered crisply. He scratched his head and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. "Now unless you have an argument that doesn't boil down to love, I suggest you piss off. I'm trying to eat here"

"Your parents would have raised you," he said after a moment's pause, and he seemed to be desperately struggling to hold ground.

"Meciel raised me," Harry said, peering up at Sirius and grinning when a red flush began to cover the man's sickly, pale features.

"They...they would have taught you," Sirius continued, his hands wringing together as if he didn't know whether to cry or wring Harry's neck. "Important things, about....stuff..."

“Meciel has taught me more than anything my parents could have,” Harry responded lazily, absently twirling his spoon in his hand and feeling quite bored.

“So it’s like that,” Sirius said harshly. He stopped pacing and loomed over Harry’s seated form, desperation giving way to twelve-years of repressed anger.

“Yeah, it’s like that,” Harry agreed and gave Sirius withering look, assessing the man and finding him lacking. “Your problem, you worm-infested neutered stray, is that you don’t want to care about me because you love me. You want to care about me because you loved my parents.”

“That’s not true,” Sirius shouted angrily.

“...and now you’re a liar,” Harry added and shook his head in mock-disappointment. “You don’t have a lot going for you, do you?”

Sirius twitched, flexing his fingers madly, but he seemed more hurt than angry.

“I loved you the moment your dad let me hold you...” he began.

“And now we’re back to my parents again,” Harry interrupted callously.

“What does it matter?” Sirius suddenly roared, his face flushed with anger. “I love you regardless!”

The kitchen was suddenly silent; the only sound being Sirius’ harsh breathing and Harry’s incessant tapping of the spoon on the table. He had stopped twirling it in his hand and was regarding Sirius with disgust and contempt. Some part of him- a very small part but still a part- was stung by the other man’s admission.

“It matters to me,” Harry said coldly after a moment’s beat. “But, hey, what do I care? Meciel’s all I want and all I need.”

“You sound like a lapdog,” Sirius said, but the anger had drained out of him and he looked very tired and sick. He pulled out a chair and

sat back down at the table. "You're not going to get very far in life thinking like that."

"You don't comprehend- nobody comprehends what she gives me," Harry said with a sudden burst of anger. "I have skills and powers that far outweigh most of this puny Order. I'll be the first to admit, Dumbledore is better than I am, Voldemort too, but it won't stay that way forever. One day, I'll be the most powerful wizard in the world."

Sirius was shaking his head in disgust.

"This isn't boasting, Black, this is cold, hard truth," Harry snapped, Hellfire threatening to send him into a temper. He stopped, took a deep breath, and calmed himself down. His next words were softer, but no less harsh. "So do yourself a favour. Stay on my good side."

"There's more to life than power," Sirius said quietly, staring at Harry with haunted eyes.

"Like what?" Harry asked witheringly

"Friends," Sirius responded quietly, but passionately. "Friends you would fight and die for, family to hold onto, and the decency to do what is right! Any of them!"

"Says the weak," Harry said and Sirius shook his head. Harry sighed, irritated and annoyed but feeling compelled to elaborate. "I'll admit, I once believe in all that crap, Black. But I found out soon that the world doesn't work that way for everybody. I didn't have any friends that would fight for me; they all cowered away when somebody tried to hurt me." Dudley Dursley's face popped in his mind and Harry winced, trying to suppress hurts long past.

"Harry..." Sirius began.

"I didn't have a family that loved me, or even liked me," Harry continued, ignoring Sirius, and his voice rose and rose with every word. "Hell, whenever I tried to do the right thing I got spat on! Whenever I tried to make myself happy, all I got was pain! That's when I found out, Sirius, that the world doesn't care about that sort of

crap. The world runs on one thing- well, two things, but oil is pertinent to this conversation. The world runs on power. To be happy, you need to have power.”

“It sounds like the Dursley’s weren’t the nicest people,” Sirius said softly, looking at Harry with sympathy and pity- something that made Harry twitch with anger. “But not everybody’s like that.”

“Oh, but they are,” Harry said and stared into Sirius’ eyes. “Do you want to hear a little theory I have? It’s sort of a joint work of philosophy by Meciél and me about human nature.” At Sirius nod, he continued. “I think that God made it so that all humans are born evil, right from the get go, and they spend the rest of their lives striving to suppress that evil.

“God made babies evil,” Sirius repeated slowly.

“Yeah,” Harry said, feeling pleased and nodding his head. “It could be because He has a twisted sense of humour or because He likes it when we struggle to be good people.”

“Is that why you shackled up with her?” Sirius questioned carefully, gesturing to his head and nodding in Harry’s direction. “Because you hate....God?”

“I don’t hate God,” Harry said with a snort. “Meciél hates God, sure, but hell; He threw her out of paradise and into eternal darkness. She’s got a grudge against him. Personally, I believe that God doesn’t give a two-bit fuck about me, or anybody else, and the feeling is reciprocated. Besides, He promotes weakness- all that crap that you were talking about- and I despise weakness.”

“Of all the wizards who hold onto those, I would hardly say that Dumbledore is weak,” Sirius said, a hint of triumph in his eyes.

“Yes, you’re right,” Harry said slowly and gave Sirius a thin smile. “So, where’s his family?”

Sirius blinked.

“What?” He asked in confusion.

“Where’s his family?” Harry repeated. “Where’s his wife, or husband, if he swings that way? Where are his children? Where are his friends? Sure, I’ve seen a lot of acquaintances, maybe, but not anything like you’re describing.”

Sirius stared at Harry, completely dumbfounded.

“He fights for what’s right...” he began weakly.

“Does he?” Harry asked seriously. He shook his head wryly. “Do you know the exact reason why Dumbledore stands up to Voldemort? It could be for a number of reasons, Voldemort hates Dumbledore- that might make it self defence. Dumbledore might not want to lose power...”

“You sound like a Death Eater,” Sirius spat in disgust. “You sound like Voldemort. You know Dumbledore is not like that.”

“Don’t be too trusting in your little leader,” Harry warned, throwing the spoon to the table with a loud clatter and folding his arms over his chest. “He made a choice once, a choice between family, friends and all that crap, and power. Guess what he chose?”

Sirius was silent.

“He chose power, Black,” Harry said softly, his voice taking on a seductive edge. “He chose raw, surging power and he crushed his enemies with it. I don’t know what the price was for it but I’m sure he has no regrets.”

The kitchen was silent once again, Harry smiling triumphantly and Sirius’ face completely blank. When the fugitive spoke again, his voice was flat and lacked any form of emotion.

“Go away, Harry,” he said softly. “Just...go away.”

“With pleasure,” Harry said and rose to his feet.

He turned to leave and was at the door when Sirius spoke up, his voice a mixture between disgust and sadness.

“You’re a disgrace to your parents.”

Harry paused at the door, not even looking back as he responded.

“Somebody like Amanda might protest that she’s not,” Harry said slowly. “Somebody like you might rage against that statement. Somebody like me, Black, doesn’t care.”

“Frendo!” Harry snarled, his wand flicking expertly in the complex movements of the spell.

A blinding flash of sapphire light blasted from his wand and reduced a dusty armchair into a smouldering pile of ash. Harry glared at pile, almost as if it were its fault for the fury he was feeling, and he raised his wand again, ready to blast the ash into something smaller and a hell of a lot less distinguishable.

“You seem agitated,” Meciél noted calmly, her illusion dressed in prim silver and white robes.

She stood in a gloomy corner, watching Harry tear the large unused bedroom apart without any real concern. Apart from the armchair, an old, dusty bookshelf and half a queen-sized had already fallen victim to Harry’s frustration, rendering them into smoking piles of charred debris.

“Wow, you’re quick,” Harry snapped sharply, but he lowered his wand and sighed. The anger burning brightly in his veins was dimming and a sudden tiredness was overtaking him. He felt drained.

“You know, without the extraordinary magical skills you possess or my influences, your temper tantrum here would have been nothing more than kicking a few chairs and whining about how your life isn’t fair,” Meciél observed lightly.

"I doubt I'd have ever gone down that road," Harry muttered, but a grin tugged at his lips. He shook his head with a snort. "Man, I'd make one fucked-up teenager, wouldn't I?"

"I live in your mind," Meciél deadpanned with an amused glint in her eyes. "Trust me- it's worse than you know."

"It usually is," Harry muttered. He flicked his wand and frowned when the pile of ash remained a pile of ash. "Ah well," he remarked. "I hope Black was attached to the chair...or the bookshelf...or that table."

There was a sudden knock on the door and Harry tensed, quickly spinning around as derision flickered over his face. He was prepared to let out a biting retort, fully expecting to see Black at the doorway, but he stopped when he realised he was wrong. It was a woman, quite dumpy and aged with stringy red locks and a motherly air about her.

"Harry Potter?" she asked hesitantly, her eyes sweeping over the room and picking out the ruined furniture with surprising ease. But, if what Harry had heard was true and she had already popped out seven kids, she would probably be used the occasional row or two.

"Weasley, right?" Harry asked gruffly, lowering his wand.

"You can call me Molly, dear," the woman said with a beaming smile. "I've just come to let you know that we're back from the hospital. I've started making lunch for all of us. You're welcome to join us."

"I'm not hungry," Harry muttered sourly, waving Molly away with his hand. He turned back to the room and sought out something else he could blow up.

"I also want to thank you," Molly said, making Harry look up with a puzzled frown. "Arthur would have died if you hadn't warned Dumbledore. Our children will all agree that we owe you a lot for keeping him with us."

"Ah," Harry uttered. He frowned, scratching his head and suddenly feeling quite awkward. Almost out of habit, an arrogant expression

crossed his face and he let out a wide smile. "Well, it probably won't be the last time I save one of you Order wizards, given that I'm definitely the better wizard amongst you. I'm just hoping that Dumbledore will pay me for it."

"Oh, well if you want a reward..." Molly began hesitantly, licking her lips and looking as if she were doing a mental tally in her head. "We don't have a lot of gold, but I suppose we do owe you a life debt..."

"No, not from you," Harry scoffed, and Molly blinked. Harry continued, a vindictive smile crossing his face. "From Dumbledore, I'm pissed off at him, you see, so my ego could handle the sight of him handing me a sack of gold himself."

Molly didn't say anything. She smiled one last time and backed out of the room, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts- and somebody else.

"You almost had me worried there for a moment," Meciél remarked quietly, her illusion springing back into existence. She observed Harry with an unfathomable look in her silver eyes.

"Huh?" Harry frowned.

"For a moment, I thought that something that Black had said seemed to strike a chord," Meciél said. She strode forward as Harry made a loud noise of disgust.

"All he said was a bunch of emotional hippy crap," he muttered sourly, idly tucking his wand back into his robes. He scratched his head and leant back against the wall.

"I seem to remember you sprouting a lot of that 'emotional hippy crap' when I first met you," Meciél noted and seemed to suppress a smile when Harry's face twitched.

"Yeah, well, I was a kid," Harry snapped loudly, then sighed and lowered his voice. "I didn't know any better. I do now."

"Good," Meciél said after a moment's pause. But something in her face had softened as she reached Harry; she surprised him by

wrapping her arms around him and drawing him into her warmth. Harry frowned, although he accepted her blazing warmth into his mind to lift his spirits and wash away his tiredness.

“Okay, not that I’ll ever dislike the feeling of breasts pressed up against me, but what gives?” he asked after a few moments.

Meciel drew back, looking at him with resigned amusement and shaking her head. Clearly she knew better a lost cause when she saw it and let the comment slide. Her eyes were soft- softer than usual, and there was an unusual glint to them that Harry had only seen a few times.

“I was touched by what you said about me,” she said softly. “I promise you, beloved, that I will be all that you will ever need, from here to the end of time.”

Harry’s face softened and he let a genuinely affectionate smile cross his face. There was a beat as affection rolled off both for their mental presences, before Harry sighed and shook his head in mock disgust.

“Sook,” he muttered affectionately.

“Pervert,” Meciel shot back.

A/N: First off, a big thanks to Warlocke, Chime, Jon and the lot at DLP for their help with the grammar and spelling of this chapter. Secondly, I've gotten a few reviews lately that deal with the religious consistencies and fact of the story. I'll be honest, apart from going to a Catholic school for the better part of my school days, I'm not religious. I have a basic knowledge of Christianity, but that's about it. So if I'm wrong or my stuff comes off as Catholic/Christian-centric, that's why. Just try to ignore it and move on with the story, I guess.

It was the sounds of clashing cutlery and tinkling goblets that finally made Harry leave the small room later that night. He had spent most of the day practising his spells, essentially reducing the room to a nine by seven graveyard of several different pieces of furniture and the very ugly wallpaper. It was only after that Harry heard his stomach grumbling that he realised he was hungry.

"I really need to eat something," Harry muttered as he strode out of his room and down the large stairs.

He glanced at the house-elf heads mounted on the walls and grinned, raising his arm and pointing at one of the middle ones, a particularly fearsome one with hateful eyes and a snarl that seemed to have been permanently etched into it in death. "Hey, look at that one's mouth. It kinda makes you wonder what it was doing before they chopped its head off."

'That was something I really didn't need to hear,' Meciell murmured, half-repulsed and half-amused. 'I must admit, the decor of this house is not what I had expected from the Order of Phoenix.'

"Which is probably why they're here," Harry shrugged, jumping down the last flight of stairs with a springy hop. A small thump resounded in the hallway leading to the kitchen and Harry finally noticed a delicious aroma of hot food. "Now how about..."

It was at that exact moment that a pair of moth-eaten velvet curtains- its crimson colour almost completely faded- flew apart. For a moment, Harry thought it was a window but then he realised it was a portrait; the occupant being an old, and very ugly, lady, who was in the

process of yelling and screaming. The yellowing skin at the corners of her eyes tightened, her narrow, spiteful face fixed in an expression of derision and hatred.

“Filth! Scum! Mudbloods and half-breeds desecrating the noble and ancient house of Black!” The old woman howled, her voice shrieking so loud that a nearby umbrella stand, which seemed to have been made from an amputated troll-leg, toppled over.

Harry winced, the hairs on the back of his arms rising as the woman continued unabated.

“How dare you invade the sanctity of the pure? How dare you defile three hundred years of noble history with your unworthy blood! You are all scum! You are all filth! You are all weak muggle-loving fools who will perish at the hand of the Dark Lord! He will strike down mudbloods and half-breeds and he will cleanse this world of weaklings and incompetents!”

“Hey, shut the hell up, you stupid, cranky bitch!” Harry snapped as he strode passed, glaring at the portrait, giving it a withering glare. “Your voice is enough to give anybody a bloody migraine.”

“You! How dare you speak to me like that?” The woman snarled, her eyes bulging as she rounded on Harry. She paused and seemed to sniff the air, before an expression of utter revulsion crossed her face. “Half-blood! I smell it on you! Half-blood! Weak, tainted, dirty wizard! How dare you desecrate...”

“Whoa, what the fuck did you just call me?” Harry snarled, his anger spiking, and he whirled around to glare at the portrait with narrowed eyes. “You’d better watch yourself, you wrinkled piece of centaur shit! The last time I checked, portraits couldn’t cast spells, and I could.”

The old woman let out a loud bark of shrieking laughter, her imperious and haughty gaze coming down to rest upon Harry. From the corner of his eye, Harry noticed that the kitchen door had opened and a wizard quickly striding towards him.

"You!" The woman howled angrily, her eyes flashing with rage. Her face was twisted up with spite to the point where she was barely recognisable. "You, a measly half-blood dare threaten a lady of noble blood? You are filth, weak and tainted! To presume that you could..."

"Effodio!" Harry barked angrily, his wand flicking out in a blur.

A loud bang echoed in the hallway- there was a flash of silver light, an odd gong and suddenly the portrait flashed with sparkling blue magic, the blur of silver deflecting off it and into the roof. Harry hissed in anger even as broken bits of timber and dust fell around him, a dangerous glint coming into his eyes. The woman howled with laughter, pointing a wrinkled, yellow finger at him.

"Harry..." somebody called from behind him, but Harry ignored him and Hellfire flooded his body. Dark powers sped into his wand and smoke curdled from its runes, the tip glowing in an odd hellish light.

"Impressive spell, half-blood!" The woman cackled, clearly enjoying her triumph. She clapped her hands together, her eyes brimming with madness. "But my charms will subvert all your attempts to destroy me! It is the way of the pure, to shrug off the filth of the tainted and embrace a new..."

"Pestise ignis!" Harry hissed coldly and the woman cut off, staring down at Harry with dawning horror as she recognised the incantation.

His wand glowed, sulphur reeking in the air as Harry poured a blaze of seemingly liquid fire into his hand. Dark pleasures tingled in every nerve in his body as Harry, with slow, deliberate movements, swished his wand, forming a bright crow of cursed fire. With a malicious grin, Harry cocked his wrist and the fiery bird dove from his hand and into the portrait.

The cursed fire flashed and, with odd screeching noises, it exploded forward. Harry caught a glimpse of a vaguely-formed crow of flame amidst the writhing fire before it slammed into the portrait. The house rocked- Harry's eyes widened and he was almost thrown off his feet- as the portrait was engulfed in searing flames. The old woman howled in fear and pain, her screams indistinct and chilling as she

clawed at her frame, almost as if she was attempting to flee. The fiendfyre pulsed, ripping across the charmed portrait and eating away at wood, paint and whatever magic lay beyond them, until there was nothing left except a blazing wall, the fire threatening to rage far beyond anybody's control.

Harry flicked his wand again, his brows furrowed in concentration and the fire paused its assault on the remainder of the wall and house, before, with a curious squelching noise, it was forced away from the wall and funnelled back into the tip of Harry's wand. An odd red glow remained until Harry swished his wand, and it disappeared with a shower of pale yellow sparks and a puff of smoke.

"Well, that takes care of that," he muttered with satisfaction. He sighed, almost regretting the sensation of Hellfire draining away from him, and turned towards the kitchen, recognising the wizard who had approached him as Sirius. "Well, Black," Harry remarked, his lips twitching, and he gestured at the still red-hot wood next to him. "I hope that bitch wasn't a friend."

Sirius recovered quickly, his face transforming from a gape of shock to a fully-blown grin of amusement. He let out a barking laugh, shaking his head and thumping Harry on the back- an action that caused Harry to grit his teeth.

"Good work, Harry," Sirius crowed as he led Harry into the kitchen. "We've been trying to get rid of that old hag for ages! We tried a lot of different spells, as well as a few muggle methods, but the whole wall was protected."

"When in doubt, blow it up," Harry said with a shrug, walking into the bright kitchen.

He paused, suddenly feeling a little wary as he took in the size of the table and the number of people behind it.

"What spell was that?" Sirius asked cautiously sniffing the air and glancing back at the blackened wall. He suddenly seemed cautious as the initial excitement over the destruction of the portrait disappeared. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Fiendfyre," Harry answered absently, staring down the table.

There had to be at least twenty people there, ranging from the venerable Headmaster to a whole litter of redheads- some he vaguely recognised from Hogwarts. With a pang of hatred, Harry noticed Snape amongst the people- although he took pleasure in the fact that the potions professor looked less than happy to see him as well.

"Fiendfyre," Sirius mused carefully. 'I've never heard of that before."

"Its dark magic," a scarred and grizzled man growled and Harry recognised Moody, who was staring at him suspiciously with his glowing-blue eye. "Cursed fire. Very dangerous. Very powerful. I lost my leg to it."

"Fiendfyre, Potter?" Snape hissed amongst the sudden hush around the table. The Potion Professor's sallow face flashed with a sudden wariness that Harry barely noticed. "It seems the Boy-Who-Lived is a bit on the reckless side."

"That's enough," Dumbledore commanded and the table fell silent. He gave Harry a small nod and gestured at one of the chairs.

Harry scowled in anger, smoothing down his robes and staring around the table. Most of the members were watching him speculatively or disapprovingly, a couple of crimson-robed men and women paying considerable attention to him. Still, there were some who were glancing at him curiously, several with outright looks of adoration or admiration on their faces- most notably a small, thin man that looked to be permanently high on some form of drug.

"You do realise that we are a resistance against the dark forces?" Sirius breathed in his ear harshly. Harry sighed and took the empty seat by Dumbledore's right, sitting down next to Moody.

"You are the real one, right?" he asked as Sirius handed him a plate from the kitchen bench. "Because I'll kill you again if you're not."

"I am, laddie," Moody growled, his blue eye revolving slowly in his empty socket. "I tell you, they'll never take me like that again. I'll be dead before I let that happen."

He looked particularly paranoid, glancing at anything and everything. Harry noticed that his plate was still full and that the grizzled ex-Auror was discreetly flicking his wand under the table, casting every potion-detection spell Harry knew and a few he didn't. Harry frowned and looked at his own food, suddenly feeling wary. He sighed and pulled out his own wand, much to the grunted approval of Moody, and began casting his own spells.

"Harry," Dumbledore greeted jovially. "So glad you could join us. Mrs Weasley has quite outdone herself this time."

"Oh, Albus," Molly mumbled, looking embarrassed and colour rising to her cheeks.

"You're Harry Potter!" the excitable little man exclaimed, his eyebrows disappearing under his wizard's hat.

"Really? I am?" Harry muttered in annoyance. He rolled his eyes. "Thanks for telling me that. I had no idea who I was. It's good that the Order has observant people like yourself to pass on such vital information."

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore reprimanded gently, as the excitable wizard looked crestfallen. "Surely you can put aside your temper for just one night?"

"I could," Harry said, flicking his wand over his dinner again. He was satisfied with the results and placed his wand back in his robes, picking up his fork and shovelling it into his mashed potatoes. "But I won't."

Dumbledore merely smiled. After a moment of surveying those assembled at the table, most of whom were chatting to each other while glancing over at Harry, the old wizard stood up and clanged his fork against his crystalline goblet.

“As you might have noticed, we have a guest joining us for dinner before our meeting,” he said politely. The Headmaster gestured at Harry, who grunted and gave a half-hearted wave with his hand. “Although most of you have not met Mr. Potter before, I am sure you have heard of his considerable efforts against the forces of darkness. He is also responsible for a lot of the information we now know about Lord Voldemort,” here Harry noticed many shudders and scoffed, “and Lady Vesper.”

“You’re calling that anorexic bitch a Lady?” Harry scoffed loudly. He grinned at the reactions he received- a pair of redheaded twins giggling like children and a lot of the adults frowning in disapproval- before shoving another forkful of food into his mouth.

“Language, Harry,” Dumbledore said lightly, although his own lips were twitching. He gestured to the feast spread out on the table. “For those I won’t see tomorrow, I wish you the very best Christmas. Now I suggest we dig into this delicious feast before Harry eats it all.”

“Oh, ‘uck a ‘uck,” Harry muttered, his mouth full of food.

‘Elegant, Harry, very elegant,’ Meciél murmured in amusement as the rest of the table dug into their dinner and the room exploded with talk and laughter again.

However, Harry noticed that she was distracted and focussing on something in his peripheral vision. Frowning, he turned his head and noticed that the object of her attention was a slim, attractive woman with odd purple hair and eyes that literally flashed from red to blue to green to yellow, causing one of the Weasley brats, a girl Harry barely remembered the name of, to giggle uncontrollably.

‘Okay Meciél, I know she’s pretty hot but what gives?’ Harry thought, idly gnawing on a chicken wing.

‘Remember the Aurors that attacked us at the Leaky Cauldron?’ Meciél asked and Harry stilled, his eyes scanning the woman’s face with dawning recognition.

“Son of a...” Harry muttered, his eyes widening with surprise. He dropped the chicken bone and nudged Moody in the ribs. “Hey, who’s the girl down there with the freaky eyes and the nice tits?”

“That’s Tonks,” Moody grunted. His scowl distorted the scars on his face and suddenly he looked ten times as fearsome- and ugly- than before. He didn’t say anything else but Harry noticed that the crippled Auror’s magical eye never budged from watching him.

‘That name sounds familiar,’ Meciél said.

“Well, I don’t think she’ll recognise me,” Harry muttered.

Nonetheless, he kept his head down for the rest of the dinner, moodily poking at it with his fork. To the outside world, it seemed as if he was half-asleep. In reality, he and Meciél engaged in a humorous game of “guess what evolved from this pile of sludge?” within his mind. It was a lot more fun than it sounded.

It wasn’t long before dinner was finished. Harry sat back, idly rubbing his now-full stomach, as Molly ushered the red-haired children away from the table, despite their protests and complaining. He grinned at them and waved at Ron, who looked even more disgruntled as he was shepherded from the door.

“Harry?”

Harry turned his head and noticed Dumbledore was peering down at him, a benign smile on his face.

“You called?” Harry asked lazily.

“We’re about to have an Order meeting,” Dumbledore said gently. “And I’m afraid you are not permitted to attend just yet.”

Harry stiffened and dropped his fork. It landed on his plate with a clatter as Harry turned to Dumbledore, his eyes narrowing in anger.

“I’m not permitted?” Harry asked indignantly. He lowered his voice and leaned closer to Dumbledore. “You’re having a meeting to talk

about a resistance against Voldemort and you want the person who's duelled him twice to go away?"

"You are not part of the Order, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly, stroking his beard and sighing softly. "There are protocols that must be adhered to. Besides, there is certain information that you are not ready for, not just yet, and the Order is playing a critical role in protecting this information."

"I thought we were allies," Harry said coldly, folding his arms over his chest. "I thought we were going to do this together."

"An alliance must run two ways, Harry," Dumbledore said softly. "And frankly, I fear that any information that is given to you will put our mission in harms way. You have a tendency to act before you think and the Order cannot afford to tip its hand at the present moment."

"What if I said I wouldn't do anything?" Harry asked with a scowl.

"This lack of action- would this be similar to the time when you told me you heeded my advice and stay away from the Leaky Cauldron?" Dumbledore remarked coolly.

Harry was silent, absently chewing his bottom lip as his eyes went blank.

"Fine," he said after a moment's pause. Annoyance and anger surged through his veins as he got to his feet. "Whatever. I don't want to be part of your stupid club anyway."

"Have a happy Christmas, Harry," Dumbledore called out as Harry turned and strode towards the kitchen door.

"Yeah," Harry grumbled under his breath as he left the room, ignoring Ron, the girl and the other red-haired brats that were crouching near the doorway, trying to eavesdrop. "Happy fucking Christmas, you old bastard."

Harry woke up the next morning feeling rather disgruntled and annoyed. The former being residual emotion from yesterday, the latter being caused by the loud and excited laughter and chatter from

the room next door. He sighed loudly and rolled over, pulling the blankets over his head and fumbling for the wand in his waistband.

"Huh," he mumbled drowsily, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with his left hand.

'You sound hesitant,' Meciél noted.

"Thinking," Harry replied shortly. He still felt drowsy as he sat up, a loud yawn escaping his mouth. "To maim or not to maim."

'Aim three centimetres left of that dark patch on the wall with a silver-arrow curse,' Meciél advised. 'Judging by the sound, that will get one of the twins in the lower left ribs and pierce his liver. He'll have five to twenty minutes to live if he doesn't get immediate medical attention.'

"Tempted," Harry groaned and sat up. He rubbed his bleary eyes again and threw his legs over his bed. "Oh so tempted."

'It's my job,' Meciél said lightly.

A few minutes later, a fully-dressed Harry walked downstairs, fingering the collar of his shirt with a frown. The illusionary charms he had placed over his robes were extremely well crafted- it was Meciél's speciality, after all- but they itched when the illusion had to extend the disguise from the material underneath it.

"Good morning, Harry!" Molly Weasley greeted with a beaming smile. She was waving her wand over the hole in the wall where the portrait had once been, using some charms Harry had never heard of to remove the scorching and repair the hole. "Merry Christmas!"

Harry just grunted and gave a half-hearted wave. He strode for the kitchen and none-to-gently pushed open the door with his palm. It rocked on its hinges as Harry lumbered through, idly scratching his head and heading for the cupboards. The kitchen, which had been full of noise a second ago, died down as the redheaded brats stared at him. They were all seated at the table, scraps of wrapping paper lying around ignored them and started opening the cupboards one-

by-one, making a noise of disgust in his throat when he didn't find what he wanted.

"Um...Harry?" Ron asked hesitantly. The red-haired boy almost flinched when Harry's annoyed gaze swung towards him. "Mum's making a proper breakfast in a few minutes."

"Not staying," Harry grunted, slamming the last cupboard shut with a scowl.

"What?" The young-girl exclaimed. She ran her hand through her crimson hair and glared at him scandalously. "You can't leave! It's Christmas!"

"I don't do Christmas," Harry snapped at her. He blinked, running his eyes up her nightgown-clad form appreciatively.

Ginny noticed his gaze and blushed, quickly wrapping her dressing gown around her body and scowling at him. The two twin boys narrowed their eyes and folded their arms in unison, staring at him flatly.

"You don't celebrate Christmas?" Ron asked obliviously. "How can you not celebrate Christmas?"

"Long story short, I broke my arm on Christmas day when I was five," Harry said. Memories flashed before his eyes, ones he had buried deep down in his subconscious.

Dudley had pushed him down in the excitement of opening his presents, partly to get him out of the way and partly because he didn't want Harry to steal any of them like he had the last Christmas. To be fair, Harry had only taken a small plastic car that Dudley had thrown aside but his cousin, in typical childish fashion, had suddenly decided he wanted it when he saw Harry playing with it. Vernon and Petunia had taken him to a hospital and, when he was taken home, had shoved him in the cupboard for two whole days for ruining their Christmas dinner. It was recollections like these that made the murder of the Dursleys all the sweeter.

Of course, there was also a bit of conflict of interest involved, with Meciél being anti-Jesus, anti-God, anti-Holy Spirit, anti-saint and generally anti-anything that involved bright smiles and naive cheerfulness.

"What's this?" Molly said, bustling in and sighing as she started flicking her wand. Pots and pans jumbled out of the kitchen draining rack and cupboards flew open, the ingredients that Harry had just passed down flying out and landing on the bench.

"Harry's not staying for Christmas, Mum," Ginny complained loudly.

Harry made a face at her and turned towards Molly, folding his arms and giving her a challenging look.

"Oh, is that so, Harry?" Molly asked, not looking that concerned. "Okay dear, we'll see you tonight then. You're more than welcome to pop in for our lunch. We're having a roast and everybody's going to be here."

"Well, how is he going to get his presents then?" Ginny asked sourly.

"When you came down, there was a pile of wrapped presents on the table, right?" Harry asked her and she nodded. Harry smiled thinly. "Do you see a pile of presents for me? Better yet, do you see one present that's got my name on it?"

Ginny hesitated.

"Exactly," Harry said coolly.

He gave Molly a short nod and stalked from the kitchen, striding past a bleary-eyed Sirius and the tall, dark crimson-robed Auror he had seen last night. The former opened his mouth to say something and the latter eyed him suspiciously, but before any of them could make a sound, Harry had opened the front door and stepped outside.

"I'm glad I jumped out of this country as soon as I could," Harry muttered grumpily. He kicked a patch of snow and watched with a childish flare of satisfaction as it slammed against a letterbox, soaking a stack of envelopes poking out.

‘It is a little bit colder than I remember,’ Meciél admitted.

Harry grunted in agreement and wrapped his robes around him tighter, trying to ignore the biting wind that hit his face. There was an irritating itch under his chin- the illusion around him compensating for the extra changes- and he scratched it roughly- before blowing his warm breath onto his icy fingers. A moment later, Meciél skilfully adjusted his neural system and the temperature around him felt as if it had been raised a dozen or so degrees. Despite his changed perceptions, Harry kept the robes draped around him. Sure, he may feel as if he was warm but his body wasn’t and it would be best he remembered that. The last time he had forgotten had left him with frostbitten fingers that he couldn’t move properly for three days.

‘I believe you were eight,’ Meciél murmured into his head and Harry instinctively shivered at a sensation akin to a warm breath blowing across his ear. ‘You were so young yet so angry. You killed five people in a month.’

“Two murderers, one rapist and a couple of punks that tried to mug me,” Harry murmured softly, cutting the road and ignoring the blaring horn of a speeding car that slammed on its breaks. Ice and snow crunched under his boots as he absently made a rude gesture with his hand at the driver and stepped onto the footpath.

‘The demons didn’t go hungry that month,’ Meciél laughed and Harry’s lips twitched.

He rubbed his eyes and crossed into a snow-covered playground. For a moment his mind flashed back to Little Whinging- there had been a playground just like this one that had been his favourite home away from home.

‘You’re being awfully introspective today,’ Meciél observed carefully.

“I hate Christmas,” Harry answered sourly, kicking a clump of snow from the ground. It flew through the air struck one of the swings, just as a cry filled the air.

Harry's head whipped around, his eyes narrowing and Hellfire rushing through him in an instant. His entire body tingled as his hand literally flashed towards his wand, grasping the slim piece of wood tightly with a potent curse at the tip of his tongue.

'Paranoid much?' Meciél asked amusedly. 'Relax. It's only a group of children.'

Meciél was right. On the other side of the playground, Harry could see three burly teenagers crowded around a smaller child. Harry reluctantly released his hold on Hellfire and it left his body in a rush, making him shiver. But his eyes remained narrowed and he watched as one of the older kids shoved the smaller child into the snow, his two friends giving loud hoots of laughter.

'That's an entertaining way to spend Christmas,' Meciél noted. 'Just ignore them, beloved. Let's go back to that dreary old house. At least we'll be warm.'

Harry ignored her, his stare lingering on the smaller kid. It was a small and scruffy-looking boy with unkempt hair and dirty, soiled clothing. The boys above him were large, both in muscle and in fat and were eying the smaller boy with nothing less than pure disdain and scorn. Harry felt anger flicker through him and he ignored Meciél as he strode towards them with clenched hands.

"Hey!" He shouted loudly, causing the three boys to glance up. The leader, the brawny boy who had shoved the smaller kid, ran a hand through his mousy-brown hair and sneered at him with his piggy little eyes.

"What the fuck do you want?" the muggle snarled threateningly. "You got a problem, queer?"

"Queer?" Harry mocked, folding his arms and snorting in derision. "That's the best you can come up with? You really are a retard, aren't you?"

“What the hell did you just call me?” the leader hissed angrily, flexing his arms and motioning for his two buddies to flank him. They did, practically growling with anger, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Whoa,” Harry said, widening his eyes theatrically. His sinister grin didn’t fade as he brushed a bit of falling snow out of his hair. “Stupid, ugly and deaf- you’ve got it bad, don’t you? You know, there’s a reason why the doctors say that brothers and sisters shouldn’t fuck. I guess you’re exhibit c on that debate, huh?”

The boy frowned, clearly mulling over what Harry said, straining to understand what Harry had just said. Harry rolled his eyes and groaned.

“Fuck, you really are a moron, aren’t you?” He snorted. “Okay, I’ll go slow with the next part so it sinks in. You will go away or I will hurt you so hard that your children will feel it thirty-years from now and ask ‘what the fuck was that?’”

Harry had been talking very slow and making animated gestures, first pointing at the three menacing boys, then tapping his fingers against his palm, then pointing at himself, then slamming his fist into his open palm, and then cupping his groin and giving an over-exaggerated wince. He finished it all with a brilliant smile and two-thumbs-up.

The ring-leader of the group snarled wordlessly at him but after an uneasy glance at Harry, who was sporting a rather sadistic grin and a disturbingly maniacal glint in his green eyes, the boy hesitated. Perhaps it was Harry’s attitude or perhaps it was the very visible scar slanting down from his brow that indicated that Harry had been in a few brawls himself, but the teenage muggle backed off and sneered.

“Fine,” he snapped, jerking his head. “Come on, guys, lets get out of here and leave the gutter trash to mingle with his own kind.” He swung his eyes on the fallen boy. “You stay away from my house from now on or nobody will be able to help you! You understand me?”

The fallen boy didn’t say a word as he hatefully glared up at the three with watery eyes, looking as if there was nothing more he’d like to do

than kill all three of them at that very moment. As the three muggles strolled away, he clambered up from the ground and scowled.

"Thanks," he muttered grudgingly. He brushed himself off and Harry noticed the palm-print bruises on his small and underfed arms. Something clenched in his stomach and he cleaned his throat gruffly.

"You should be home," Harry muttered, glancing away from the kid and suddenly feeling embarrassed now that it was over. He glanced up at the overcast sky and frowned. "Fuck, this place gets cold."

"My Dad doesn't like Christmas," the boy said and hesitated. "He...I don't usually get any presents. It's better if I just come out and hang around the playground and leave him to himself."

"Yeah," Harry said awkwardly. "I...well, the person who looks after me doesn't like Christmas either. She's pretty nice though, so I don't really care."

"Must be nice to have somebody who cares," the boy muttered softly to himself, but Harry picked it up and frowned. The boy, who could only be about ten, had his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground with a downcast expression.

"I've been where you are, kid," Harry said uncomfortably and the boy looked up, a curious expression on his face. "I..." Harry trailed off and cleared his throat. Impulsively, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a fifty-pound note- which he had nicked from a loose cloak last night- and threw it at the kid. "Use that. Go...and do whatever with it. Drugs, alcohol, whatever you use to keep yourself straight."

"I don't drink," the boy exclaimed quickly- a little too quickly in Harry's opinion. He snatched the fifty from Harry's hand and paused, only uttering "thanks," before speeding off, almost as if he were afraid that Harry might change his mind.

'That was unusually nice of you,' Meciell noted carefully. 'It must be the festive spirit. I've never seen you part with money so willingly before. We could have used that to replace the silk sheets that were lost when the apartment went up.'

“Not everybody has you, Meciél,” Harry said absently, blinking and averting his gaze from the retreating back of the small boy. He scratched his head, ignoring the bitter wind that swept across the park, bringing up a fine mist of snow that caught onto his clothes. “No matter how much they need something like you, some people are just alone.”

‘But not you,’ Meciél reminded gently.

“Not me,” Harry agreed slowly. He paused and heaved a deep sigh. “Alright, do I need to kick a small furry animal or something or will you let this drop right now?”

‘Does Black count as a small furry animal? I ask merely because if you wanted to kick him, I wouldn’t complain,’ Meciél wondered and Harry sniggered, turning away from the snow-covered playground and disappearing into the soft sprinkle of snow that drifted down from the stormy clouds above.

A/N: The first part of this chapter comes from a little snippet of one of Jon's omakes. He did the Harry/Meciel characterisation and so forth better in those few hundred words than I've done for the last few chapters- at least. With his permission, I've added a bit in, so he's the deceleration saying he's cool and thanks. He'll never shut up about it now, though it's sad that he's getting better at the characterisation than I am. On that note, I'd like to thank everybody who helps me out with this story, especially Jon and nuhuh, who I'm repeatedly bouncing ideas off and have the amazing ability to inspire me to write, and the guys at DLP who help with corrections and point out when I screw up- which, frankly, is a lot more than you realise.

Harry only spent one more day in that dreary old house- Grimmauld Place number 12, from what the little slip of paper told him; Meciel had been quite impressed with the illusionary charms that hid the place- before Dumbledore took him and the rest of the Hogwarts students back to the castle. The rest of the holidays were spent at Hogwarts and he spent most of his time lounging around, when Meciel wasn't pressing him to hone his magical abilities. There were very few students who bothered him during this time. The Weasley boys and girl generally avoided him- the boys seemed to be giving him a grudging respect for saving their father and the girl trying to fight back whatever physical attraction she felt for him with a feisty attitude. Amanda, the only other person who might have bothered him, had gone home for the holidays and Harry took the time to enjoy the solitude that he so rarely received at Hogwarts. But the holidays were over after a few weeks and the rest of the students came back to Hogwarts as classes started up once more. It was hot.

That was all Harry could say as he drifted inwards to the inner plans of his consciousness. The din and bustle of the outside world was faint as if it were miles and miles away- although truthfully, his physical body was sitting in the Great Hall during breakfast. His mental self lay on his back, his head in Meciel's lap as she idly stroked his hair. All around them, the desert blistered and scorched everything it touched, and Harry let out a sigh of contentment as Meciel blocked out the more painful aspects of the desert environment and just left him with the comfortable heat.

"This is way better than snow," he murmured. He glanced around the arid stretch of land, noting faint mountains in the distance. "Where is this place, anyway?"

"Close to Egypt," Meciél said quietly. "This is where my fourth host died- quite painfully, I might add."

"Fourth host," Harry said interestedly. "That's going a while back."

"Indeed," Meciél said.

With a small gesture of her hand, a group of people suddenly appeared amongst the red hot sands. A small woman, looking as if she were in her early twenties, was panting and gasping on the ground as she feebly tried to crawl forward. She was dressed in skimpy leathers and a large spear protruded from her side, precious blood leaking onto the sandy ground. The tallest of the armada of leather-armoured men around her pulled at the spear and the woman gasped, her eyes widening with pain as the barbed head brutally torn out of her. A moment later, with blood bubbling at her lips, she fell unconscious just as the first of the men began to take off his armour.

"A most painful death for both of us, Harry" Meciél said detachedly, watching the spectacle in front of her with cool silver eyes. She waved her hand and the figures disappeared in a whirlwind of sand, leaving nothing behind to signify what Harry had just seen. "One of the worst, I believe."

"I bet," Harry muttered. He was frowning and he gazed up at Meciél's face, her pale skin radiant with a silver glow that Harry knew she had placed there to put him at ease. "You know, I've been wondering why you don't call me 'beloved' anymore."

Meciél smiled faintly.

"Because you are no longer a child who needs to suckle at my breast for reassurance," Meciél explained airily. Harry smirked and opened his mouth, but Meciél moved her hand and brought it to his lips,

cutting him off. "I believe the irritant is desperately clamouring for your attention."

Harry rolled his eyes but pulled himself out of his mind and back into reality. The soft din in the background suddenly rolled over his ears in waves of noise and he winced, opening his eyes and blinking rapidly as he glanced around the Great Hall.

"Harry?" Amanda asked hesitantly, biting her lip and absently flicking her blonde hair out of her eyes. The two were seated at the Gryffindor table, Harry being as far away from everybody else as he could manage and Amanda faithfully sticking by his side as ever. "Can I ask you a favour?"

"If you want to see me naked, then the answer is yes," Harry said leeringly and wagged his eyebrows as he reached down and took a bite out of his breakfast toast.

'I can imagine you on the cover of Playboy and Penthouse,' Meciell mused thoughtfully and Harry caught a flash of an image- a picture of him covered in leather straps and not much else. He shuddered.

'They're male magazines,' he thought sardonically. 'I know I'm sexy, but I'm not that sexy.'

He refocussed his eyes back on Amanda who, to her credit, didn't blush- quite used to Harry's perverted innuendo and outright statements by now.

"It's about the DA," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper and darting her eyes about, as if there were a hundred different people who wanted to know her secret. The rest of the Hall seemed to disagree with her and continued to chatter away about stuff that Harry really didn't give a damn about.

"The what?" Harry asked and frowned. He pushed Amanda away from him and shook his head, feeling a pang of annoyance. "And don't do that. It looks as if you have something secret to hide from everybody else and if you do, well, then it's a pain in the arse when people know you do because it's hard to pretend that you don't."

"I...think I understand that," Amanda said slowly, her eyes darting from side to side as she tried to puzzle it out. "Maybe."

"Good," Harry praised and took another bite of his toast. He flashed Amanda a sarcastic smile. "It shows that you're not that blonde after all."

"What is it with you and my hair colour?" Amanda asked in exasperation, gingerly touching her strands. "I don't see why it's that bad. I think I have nice hair."

"Blondes are dumb," Harry replied and paused. "So are brunettes. We should definitely add redheads to that list as well. In fact, let's say that all people with hair are dumb unless they're me."

'I'm sorry; you were saying brunettes were what?' Meciél asked.

'Brunette mortals,' Harry interjected calmly with a mental shake of his head. 'You're so defensive, Meciél. It's a sign of insecurity. You should look into that.'

'Little smartarse,' Meciél muttered but Harry could feel her amusement.

"What about Dumbledore?" Amanda asked with raised eyebrows. She folded her arms and glanced over at the aged Headmaster, who greeted her with a nod as he met her eyes- as if he had heard her from all the way at the staff table. "He's got hair. Do you think he's dumb?"

"What the hell is it with people asking me about that wrinkled rapist?" Harry grumbled sourly. "Besides, it's a wig."

"Dumbledore wears a wig?" Amanda exclaimed in astonishment.

Harry held back a bark of laughter as she turned her head to gaze at the Headmaster, who was conversing politely with Professor Umbridge.

“Oh yeah,” Harry lied sincerely, an honest expression on his face. He nodded earnestly at Amanda’s sceptical expression. “Seriously.”

‘Let’s make a bet,’ Meciél said slyly. ‘I’ll let you see me naked if you convince her to say that to the old man’s face.’

‘Yeah, sure you will,’ Harry scoffed and paused. ‘Wait, are you serious?’

Meciél didn’t reply and Harry grinned, staring at Amanda and wondering if he could pull it off.

“Right,” Amanda said slowly, then paused and shook her head. “Now I can’t remember what I wanted to ask you- yes, yes,” she snapped when Harry opened his mouth, a pleased expression on his face. “I get it. I’m a blonde.”

“It’s good that you admit that,” Harry said gravely and placed a hand on her shoulder, fixing a sympathetic expression on his face. “Now the healing can begin.”

“You are such an ass,” Amanda said, shaking her head as a smile tugged at her lips.

“Arse, you illiterate yank,” Harry corrected and smiled at her withering look. He took his hand off her shoulder and dug back into his breakfast, wolfing through a pile of toast in less than a minute.

“Oh, the DA,” Amanda said and darted her eyes around. “We’ve sort of hit a bit of a dead end. Hermione’s good at getting the theory behind the spells and we’re getting pretty good at casting them, including some of the ones you’ve taught me. But I’ve seen you fight before and when I look at us, I know we’re not nearly as good as we need to be.”

“Amanda, you’ll never be as good as I am,” Harry said lazily, poking at the scrambled eggs on his plate with a fork. He lifted his eyes towards the ceiling and, after seeing a roof full of stormy clouds, sighed. “I hate the fucking snow.”

"If we could be just a quarter as good as you are then we'd be a lot safer," Amanda pressed on urgently and Harry smiled arrogantly, nodding his head.

"You might even be able to take on Death Eaters," Harry said with a grin. He cracked his neck and took a sip from his goblet. "But you're not a quarter as good as I am, so I suppose you'll all be killed. Woe is you."

"Help us then," Amanda pleaded softly and Harry blinked. "We have a session tonight. Just come in and give us a few pointers on our technique."

"Um...no," Harry said after a moment, pausing to take a sip of from goblet and not looking bothered at all as Amanda gaped at him.

"Why not?" She asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said, rolling his eyes. He lifted a hand and began counting the reasons out on his fingers. "I'm lazy, you're not good enough, too much effort, can't be bothered, you people annoy me, I don't want to...take your pick."

"Please, Harry?" Amanda said softly and placed a hesitant hand on Harry's back, making his head shoot up and his eyes narrow dangerously. "For me?"

"Oh, well, in that case..." Harry began with an encouraging smile. He turned towards Amanda, who had a smile creeping over her face. "No." he finished flatly.

"Come on," Amanda protested, but she was cut short when a loud, piercing shriek filled the Great Hall.

Harry's gaze, as well as most other students, shot to the entrance of the Great Hall, where a stumbling and hiccuping woman was staggering her way through. It only took him a moment to recognise the woman as Professor Trelawney, the divination Professor. Her robes were wrinkled and old, she clutched a bottle of something that was obviously alcohol in her hand and her eyes were wide and

bloodshot behind her crooked spectacles. Behind her, Professor Umbridge was watching with a wide smile on her slack face. She schooled her expression into one of mild disapproval and tutted loudly.

“Professor Trelawney,” she said in a loud simpering voice, brandishing a scroll with a string of red silk tied around it. “I thought I had made myself clear. Your services are no longer required at Hogwarts for the present moment. If you wish to appeal my decision, you are free to lodge a complaint with the Department of Magical Employment Services. However, until such time that the appeal has passed on to an advisory council...”

“Oh, shut up you wrinkled old toad!” Trelawney screeched loudly. She stooped a swig from the bottle and with hatred distorting her normally misty features, she threw the bottle at Umbridge. Umbridge’s eyes widened and she ducked, clasping her little pink feathered hat on her head.

“Why, I never!” Umbridge said, her flabby face flickering with anger. She pulled out a short stubby wand from her pink cardigan, a determined expression on her face. “Stupefy!”

A bright flash of crimson light spat towards Trelawney, who could only stand there and blink owlishly. Dumbledore, however, had risen to his feet, his own wand in hand- there was a flash of light, something silver collided with the stunning spell and dragged it towards the ceiling, where it crashed in a shower of sparks. Umbridge was suddenly looking uncertain as Dumbledore briskly strode across the hall, his eyes hard and his expression displeased.

“Huh,” Harry said in mild interest, taking a bite out of a slice of toast. He watched as Dumbledore approached the two witches, placing a gnarled hand on Trelawney’s shoulder and staring down at Umbridge, who immediately puffed up and started muttering in a low voice. “This should be good.”

“How do you just eat when a teacher is being thrown out?” Amanda hissed at him indignantly, glaring daggers at the stout Defence

Professor, who was being guided out of the Great Hall by Dumbledore as they conversed in low mutters.

“What, is that rude or something?” Harry asked with a scowl. “Am I supposed to share my half-eaten toast with her?” He made a face and adopted a high-pitched tone as he continued. “Oh, hey, sorry about your being fired but I have something that will make you feel all better- here, have some toast!”

Amanda ground her teeth and made a huffing noise, folding her arms and looking away as Harry grinned. He took the last bite of his breakfast then pushed the plate away, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and frowning in thought.

“Okay,” he said after a moment.

“Okay what?” Amanda asked, glancing back at him curiously.

“Okay, I’ll do the lecture thingy you want,” Harry said and watched as Amanda’s face broke out into a beautiful smile. “But only if you do something for me...”

A few minutes later, Harry watched as Dumbledore strode back into the Great Hall and turned to Amanda. He gave her an encouraging nod and scowled when she hesitated, the blonde biting her lip in thought as she weighed up the pros and cons. Finally, she stood up and after taking a deep breath to gather her resolve, she walked over to the staff table and stopped in front of Dumbledore. Harry leaned forward with an intent expression on his face, narrowing his eyes in concentration as Amanda spoke up.

“Professor Dumbledore,” he heard her say and then pause as Dumbledore looked down at her with twinkling eyes. “Where...um...where do...”

Amanda broke off, flinging her head around and glaring at Harry furiously, her grey eyes pleading with him to change his mind. Harry shook his head smugly and folded his arms as Amanda turned back to Dumbledore with a defeated sigh.

“Where do you buy your wigs from, sir?” She asked dully. “I only ask because I’ve been...” she paused and frowned, reciting the words carefully as if she were afraid she’d forget, “...meaning to get one for my Wicked-Witch-Of-The-West Halloween costume.”

Harry sniggered loudly as Amanda’s cheeks flushed red. Despite McGonagall’s gasp and the chuckles from the students that had heard her, Dumbledore merely smiled down at her and said something too inaudible for Harry to hear, had he been paying attention to her. Instead, he gave another bark of laughter as Meciél grumbled in his ear.

‘I believe you owe me a certain something?’ Harry thought smugly.

‘I should have known,’ Meciél said with a faint sense of exasperation. Harry frowned and heaved a mental sigh as he gazed around the large room. There were books crammed into shelves lined up against the wall and several dozen different objects cluttered small tables. The centre of the room was crowded with at least twenty-five students, all who were watching him expectantly as he stood before them.

‘Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea after all,’ Harry thought wryly.

‘You’ve dug your hole,’ Meciél pointed out with an air of amusement

“Okay,” Harry said loudly, clearing his throat and scratching his head awkwardly. Two dozen students followed his every move as he paced on the small stage before them, eyes expectant. “Um...what do you know so far?”

“We all know Petrificus Totalus, Tarantallegra and Rictusempra,” Hermione told him neutrally. The hatred that she had held against him seemed to have died down over time and now she regarded him with a blank expression. “We’re making good progress with Protego and Stupefy, and the advanced ones are up to Plecto.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Harry asked with a snort of disbelief. When Hermione frowned in confusion, he sighed and shook his head,

suddenly feeling very weary. "Okay, those spells suck. Sure, Protego is good as a basic shielding charm and Stupefy can be useful but overall, they're pretty pathetic spells. Hell, the best one there is Plecto and any wizard worth his wand can deflect that."

There were mutters and grumblings from the group of students and Hermione frowned, putting her hands on her hips. Harry noticed her disgruntled expression and smiled arrogantly, beckoning her forward.

"Okay," he said and pulled out his wand, holding it loosely in his hand. "Duel me."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed loudly. She threw a furtive look at Amanda, who winced, already knowing what was going to happen next. "Are you serious?"

"C'mon, if you want me to give you pointers then I've got to see how you fight," Harry said and rolled his eyes. Hermione huffed in annoyance but she stepped forward, climbing up on the stage and pulling out her wand from her robes.

"On three?" she asked briskly.

Harry just stared at her, suddenly certain that she was truly an idiot. He turned his head to the crowd and sought for Amanda, giving her an incredulous and disgusted look. Just what had she been teaching these idiots?

"Okay, first mistake right there," Harry said, his eyes still locked on to Amanda's embarrassed gaze. "Here I am, your enemy, so to speak, with my attention elsewhere. What aren't you doing?"

"We haven't started yet!" Hermione protested and scowled. "And that's dirty fighting!"

"We're not Slytherins," somebody from the crowd called out and there was a rumble of approval from most of the students.

"Yeah, I noticed," Harry remarked sourly. "They'd have the balls to attack me already." He turned back to Hermione and shook his head.

in derision, his annoyance and exasperation at a new high. "Tell me, how many fights have you actually been in- and..." he interrupted when she opened her mouth, "when I say fights I mean a situation where the other person is trying to kill you."

Hermione looked abashed as she answered with a short, "None."

"Okay, none," Harry nodded, feeling pleased. "Now, let's compare your 'none' to my..." he frowned and trailed off, his mind flittering back to his previous battles as he tried to count them on his fingers. "er...you know what, I've lost track by now. Lets just say 'shit-loads'. Now, right at this very moment, what am I doing?"

"Lecturing us on how you're right?" Hermione offered sweetly.

"Yeah, sure," Harry shrugged. "I'd also have accepted 'standing', 'breathing' or 'living'. Guess where my enemies are? I'll give you a hint; most of them aren't doing any of the above three."

He smiled coldly as Hermione paled and pressed on.

"So when I give you a tip in a fight then you better fucking listen to me," he said coldly. "Because I know what I'm talking about. Ethics, morals, being the better man- it means absolutely nothing when somebody's trying to kill you. But, hey, if you're into all of that crap then I'm sure your funeral will be really touching. Honestly, there might be tears."

"Harry..." Amanda started.

"Get up here," Harry ordered and Amanda obeyed, moving through the suddenly attentive crowd and coming up to stand next to Hermione. "Now, on three if you want, both of you..."

'Stupefy!' Amanda suddenly barked. A flash of light blasted from her wand but Harry moved faster, his wand whipping up and the crimson light veering off into the ceiling, parried away by his skill.

"Attacking me while I'm talking," Harry mused, crimson sparks flying from the ceiling as Amanda started circling him. "Good. You're getting

the point. Second mistake though- pressing your advantage. You've given me time to recover and plan. You should have just kept pressing me. I'd have been rushed to defend myself and I might have made a mistake."

"Tarantallegra!" Hermione snapped, her wand flicking out sharply. Harry swatted the minor jinx away lazily, not even bothering to mutter an incantation.

"Don't use little pesky spells like that unless you're sure you can hit somebody," Harry advised, shaking his limbs and allowing the tiniest of Hellfire trickles to run through him. "Even then, unless you're looking to humiliate or distract your opponent, you're better off with something with a little more bang to it."

Amanda and Hermione exchanged glances and then moved in unison, their wands flicking through the air as they cried out incantations. Harry's wand darted as he parried and deflected a small barrage of minor spells, crimson streaks and yellow flashes of magic fizzling through the air as he batted them away.

"Plecto!" Hermione cried out, brandishing her wand above her head. "Bellua pugnus!"

There was a sharp whip-like crack and invisible force lashed out at Harry, who cocked his wrist and deflected the heavy blow with his spare hand, a glimmer of golden light forming around it from finger to wrist. An instant later, a flash of dark blue light zoomed at him and he swung his glimmering fist of golden light, caught it and threw it right back at her. Hermione muttered 'protego' and it splashed against a conjured sheet of silver magic, bouncing off and hitting one of the avid spectators.

"This is pretty pathetic, you two," Harry drawled.

He turned to glance at the student that had been hit, absently throwing a powerful curse that ripped up floorboards and caused Hermione to squeak and throw herself out of the way. The student, the Weasley girl, was staring at her hands, both being transfigured

into something resembling the paws of an animal. Harry sniggered and turned back to the two girls.

“Ferratilis!” Hermione barked, her wand moving in an elaborate series of movements.

A bundle of grey coils shot out from the tip with a loud rattling noise. A second later, the coils revealed themselves to be thick iron chains that surrounded Harry, only to shatter and fall to the ground in dozens of pieces. Harry blocked a streak of yellow light from Amanda, which rebounded into the ceiling with a loud clanging noise, and swiped his wand, causing Hermione to grunt as she was parried during mid-cast. A moment later, Amanda brandished her wand and shouted “Ventosus!”

A gust of wind swirled around her and howled forward, picking up little bits of broken chain and hurling them at Harry. Harry, with an elaborate twirl of his wand, turned the gust into a spiralling column of air and threw it at the bright orange orb that Hermione had just cast, encasing it with roaring wind and wildly-flying bits of broken metal. There was a loud pop and the orange bubble disappeared, the wind vanishing and the pieces of metal falling to the ground. For the first time, Harry attacked and darted forward, his wand slashing through the air. Silver light spilled forward in a horizontal arc, clanging against two protego shielding charms and shattering them instantly. Both girls fell to the ground and Harry smiled, idly twirling his wand in his hand.

“Is that all you’ve got?” He asked arrogantly, watching both of them carefully. Hermione ground her teeth in anger and struggled to her feet, her wand shaking in her hand.

Harry observed her with a thin smile but suddenly there was a loud bang, like a backfiring car or an exploding cauldron. Harry whipped around, his eyes widening and he hastily deflected a flash of silver light. The curse zipped sideways and slammed into one of the bookcases, tomes of all different sizes falling down as a large chunk of wood exploded in a shower of splinters.

“I guess I have a bit more?” Amanda said with a triumphant grin and Harry stared at her, honest surprise and shock in his eyes. A moment

later they transformed into mirth and satisfaction and he drew himself up, giving the blonde a light clap.

"Nice, nice," Harry said with a smile. He whipped his wand out, swiping it at the two, and muttered. "Caecus!"

A burst of violet strands swum from the tip of his wand, twisting and turning in the air and whipping around the two girls. Hermione brought up a well-cast protego but it shattered and she shrieked as the light wrapped itself around her face. She fell to the ground, whimpering as all of her senses were numbed. Amanda was luckier, managing to dispel the curse with a general counter-curse that Harry had just taught her the other day, but her fate was the same as Hermione's as Harry blasted her aside with a spectacular flash of light.

"So what have we learned today?" Harry drawled after Hermione and Amanda had been fully revived. He was twirling his wand in his hand and smiled in amusement at Hermione's anger, the girl still twitching from the after-effects of the spell Harry had hit her with.

"The answer is, of course, I'm right and you're wrong," Harry continued with an air of enjoyment and was pleased to note that he had everybody's undivided attention after defeating two of the DA's finest in a matter of moments.

"Just get to the point," Amanda groaned, gingerly touching her head and wincing when she felt a bump. Hermione waved her wand and muttered something and Amanda sighed as the minor healing charm reduced her headache to nothingness.

"Your problem, Hermione, is that you're all spells and no instinct," Harry said bluntly and Hermione flushed, clearly disliking being told off. "You had a few doozies that might have taken me by surprise if you'd played your hand better but I could tell you were feeling awkward the entire time."

"You think I might have been able to beat you?" Hermione asked after a moments pause.

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "You didn't have a chance from the beginning."

"What about me?" Amanda asked, still feeling her head. Her brow was all sweaty and there was a light behind her grey eyes that Harry was getting more and more used to during their training sessions. "How'd I do?"

"Pretty good," Harry admitted. He gestured at the broken metal chains on the ground. "Throwing them at me was a good idea. That last curse, though, was brilliant. I don't think I ever taught you that one."

"With the way you rave on and on about it, I picked up a few things," Amanda said wryly.

"Okay, so, some pointers then," Harry said, turning back to the students. He frowned in thought and hesitated. "Um...what do you know about fighting battles?"

There was a silence over the crowd of students until one girl, a redhead with pigtailed locks, raised her hand.

"My Aunt told me you could use the environment around you," she offered attentively.

Harry snorted.

"Yeah, really good duellers can use unorthodox tactics like that, transfiguring rocks into animals and banishing stuff at people," he answered. He scratched his head. "But you guys aren't really good duellers. To do that, you need to be quick with your wand and quick with your mind- thinking through half-a-dozen things in less than a second."

"We're not that bad," A Hufflepuff protested in annoyance.

"If you're worse than these two, you are," Harry said bluntly. The boy scowled furiously as Harry glanced away from him. "For the likes of

you lot, my advice to you is to keep moving. Find something relatively hard to duck behind and stay there until you need to move again.”

Harry paused, his brows furrowed in thought while the entire room regarded him in rapt attention.

“If your enemy can apparate, well, you’re probably screwed,” he said frankly. Hermione, he saw, was taking notes and he rolled his eyes but continued. “Still, if you can, find a hallway or someplace narrow to put your back against and limit their ability to surround you. Keep in mind that it’s hard to apparate in the middle of a battle and that your enemy will need concentration. If you can distract them at the right moment, there’s a good chance they’ll reappear with only one leg or something.”

“Can you apparate?” Somebody called out and Harry paused.

“Yes,” he answered shortly. “Now, if you’re surrounded in a relatively open space with lots of enemies then don’t go for direct spells. The chances are that they’ll blow you to pieces before you know what’s happened. You should distract them and slip away to a terrain that’s more suited for you- again, narrow hallways, enclosed spaces and the like.”

“How do we distract them?” Hermione asked when Harry paused.

“I don’t know,” Harry snapped. “Summon a blast of light to blind them. Topple a bookshelf over them. Hell, even the ‘looking over their shoulder and gasping a name’ trick can work. Try to use my name- it tends to scare people.” He grinned at his own joke but it faded when all he got was weak smiles in return. “Oh, go fuck a duck,” he muttered under his breath.

“Do you have any particular spells that could work here?” Hermione asked again, taking careful notes in a small leather-bound diary.

“Anything that has a large area of effect,” Harry answered. “Anybody know Evertoxuro?”

Hermione paused, frowning in thought and she mulled over the name. Finally, recognition flared in her eyes and she became wary and cautious, regarding Harry closely.

"That's a classified Dark Arts spell," she said accusingly.

"Really?" asked Harry lightly, a smug smile on his face and he watched as the rest of the students dissolved into mutterings, nudging each other and watching Harry a lot more cautiously. He lifted a hand and they all fell silent.

"So says the Ministry, right?" He continued slowly. "The same Ministry who's give you Umbridge. The same Ministry that won't let you practise basic spells. Now, gee, I wonder why they would declare a spell illegal. It's like they don't want you knowing any powerful spells at all..." he trailed off meaningfully.

Hermione flushed and many of the other students looked abashed and embarrassed as Harry cleared his throat, idly wondering how much time he had wasted tonight. He frowned, remembered where he was and continued.

"That spell works really well in those situations," he continued, twirling his wand in his hands. "It takes a bit of effort to shield against and then you have a few moments afterwards to either finish the fight or get the hell out of there."

"What if there's only one wizard after you?" asked Neville, a strange look on his normally placid face. If Harry didn't know any better, he would have said that the chubby boy looked grim and determined.

"Then go with direct spells," Harry answered, making a swift swipe with his wand to emphasise his point. "Keep them on the defensive. Don't give them any time to attack, just slug as many spells as you can at them. When they've fortified themselves with a hefty magical shield, finish it off with a shield-piercer."

"What's that?" Neville asked quietly, looking intent.

"Argentum Telum!" Harry snapped, his wand flicking up.

A glimmer of silver light, formed into the shape of an arrowhead, erupted from the tip of his wand as if shot by a bow. It streaked through the air and shot through one of the heavy tomes on the bookshelves. There was a flash of light and the book fell to the ground in tatters, a large round hole in the centre.

"That is a shield-piercer," Harry said in satisfaction as Neville stared at the book, his face pale. "It'll break or weaken most conventional shields and the backlash is often enough to send them staggering. Afterwards, follow up with Abhorreoor something nasty to keep them down."

"Kill them, you mean," Neville said softly.

"If you have to," Harry shrugged casually, not looking disturbed at all as the entire room became eerily silent. More than one of the students were staring at him with wide eyes and he sighed. "Look, I don't really give a crap if you believe Voldemort has returned or not but when you're staring down the wand of a dark wizard who wants to kill you, then you do what you have to do. Only one of you will walk away alive. Do you want it to be the Death Eater or Dark Wizard so he or she can go on and kill more innocent people?"

The group of students was silent and reflective and Harry eyed them with satisfaction in his eyes. Giddily, he rubbed his hands and clapped them together.

"Okay," he said cheerfully, breaking the group out of the sombre mood he had put them in. "Amanda, take a third of them and show them Abhorreo. You lot, you're with me. I'll show you how to cast this shield piercer. Hermione, what are you better at- protego, firumstego ordevito setego?"

"Protego," she answered.

"Oh," Harry said and schooled together a mask of disappointment. "Well, I guess you're only a kid- can't know everything." He smiled at the flicker of anger that went through her eyes and jerked his head.

“Get those brats and drum that spell into their heads. It’ll keep them alive for a little bit longer.”

“We’re not brats!” one of aforementioned brats stomped angrily, a third year girl.

“Whatever you say brat,” Harry remarked cheerfully as he waved them off.

He stood back and watched as the small group of students moved into action, a burst of noise and chatter rising throughout the room. Within his mind, Meciél made a noise of approval and her voice whispered teasingly into his ear.

‘You had best be careful. If you keep this up, you might gain yourself a few minions.’

“You shouldn’t worry about that,” Harry murmured under his breath as he strode to his small group of students, all who were watching him expectantly. “You just focus on how you’re going to be naked tonight.”

A/N: It's been brought to my attention that there are no spaces after an incantation has been said. I looked through word and concluded that it's a formatting error. I'll keep an eye on it and make the changes manually if I have to.

After his little session with the DA, Amanda had graciously 'allowed' him to use the Room of Requirement- as it was called- whenever he wanted to. Despite the ridiculous way of opening the damn door, even Harry could see a use for this room and it quickly became his new training room for several reasons. Firstly, it was harder to get too. Secondly, it was easier to seal off and thirdly, he now had an unlimited supply of desks, tables and other miscellaneous objects that he could blow up. Unfortunately, the first time Harry tested out the room proved to be a failure. Sure, the setting did remotely resemble that of a brothel but the room had been unable to conjure up any women. Still, Meciels promise had payed off and he had practically burned her very beautiful and very nude body into his mind, bringing it up at the best and worst of times, much to Meciels chagrin and amusement.

"The DA seemed to like you," Amanda said, panting slightly as she gingerly lowered herself into a chair. She shook her head, rubbing her eyes with a revolted expression on her face. "And I really don't like that spell."

"Most people don't," Harry said cheerfully, lowering his wand and gazing around the room, noting that one of his last spells had felled a bookshelf and there was a small fire eating through the thick tomes.

"What, most people don't like you or most people don't like the spell?" Amanda said teasingly.

"A bit of both," Harry answered slowly, staring at her critically. He snapped his fingers, dispelling the flames before they could grow any larger and gave Amanda a pointed look. "Isn't that why you wanted to learn it?"

"I'm just saying," Amanda protested. "It feels...weird."

"Caesus is meant to feel weird," Harry told her with a roll of his eyes. "It numbs four of your senses and if you can't see or hear anything,

then you're an easy target." He scratched the underside of his chin and frowned. "Huh. I think I need to learn a shaving charm. It's starting to get more irritating that you."

"Wow," Amanda uttered sarcastically. "I rank above your facial hair. I feel honoured."

"Don't forget humbled," Harry said and Amanda rolled her eyes. "Okay, brat, up you get. You've had a chance to practise your little spell. Now it's my turn."

"What are you doing again?" Amanda asked warily as she stood up, her wand loosely clasped in her hand. "I don't like the idea of you poking through my mind."

"I'm not poking," Harry snapped and hesitated. "I'm just looking through the mail slot a little. Just to see what your brain wants to do next."

"Alright, fine," Amanda muttered and raised her wand.

Harry caught her eye and, Meciél guiding his mind, he tentatively breached the first layer of her consciousness. It was an advanced form of Legilimency, a technique that Meciél had suggested he learn with his new array of human enemies- humans being the only species susceptible to it.

Almost immediately, a blurring rush of sound and colour overtook him. Fragments of chatter, laughter, whispers and sadness hit him in once, a chaotic din of memories and perceptions that Harry had no interest in. He frowned, shaking his head and focussing his will on what he wanted. The din died down to a mere buzz in the back of his head as he pressed forward, finally locating the section of her consciousness that dealt with movement.

"Go," he said, his voice sounding hollow and distant to his ears.

Immediately, he could tell Amanda was going to raise her arm, pivot back on her left foot and flick her wand in a series of movements that he recognised as a stunning charm. He could sense her tongue

starting to move, subconsciously licking her lips as she started to mutter the first syllables of the incantation.

'Now,' Meciell instructed carefully.

Harry lifted his wand and with a small flick he countered the spell, the glimmers of crimson light forming at the tip of Amanda's wand fading away before it could even form. Amanda blinked, scowled and flicked her wand again.

"Expell..." she started, but Harry parried the hex with almost unnatural speed, his presence in her mind allowing him to see what spell she was going to cast the instant she started.

"Keep it up," Harry commanded, circling Amanda with a wide smile on his face.

"How are you doing that?" Amanda asked in wonder, starting the incantation of another spell only to have it countered before she had even cast it.

"I'm in your mind," Harry remarked dryly and gave her a lecherous grin. "So you can stop focussing on my crotch or...what's this, well-defined muscles? Strikingly-handsome face? My, Amanda, these are some dirty thoughts right here!"

"Oh, shut up," Amanda snapped lightly, a flush appearing on her pale skin. Her lips twitched despite herself.

The movement was enough to break Harry's eye-contact and he softly grunted as the mental link between them was cut off, a sharp flare of pain resounding in his head.

"Er...you can't really see stuff my mind, right?" Amanda asked a moment later, staring at Harry with something like dawning mortification.

"Maybe," Harry lied smugly. "Why, is there something in there that you don't want me to see? You know, it's good to get things off you chest- especially if it's your shirt."

Amanda flushed again and unconsciously smoothed down the front of her robes. She lowered her wand and crossed her arms over her chest, staring at Harry with a determined and embarrassed expression.

"You're not doing that again," she declared firmly. She met Harry's darkened expression with a defiant toss of her head and the look in her eyes brooked no argument.

Harry chewed on his lip, half-tempted to force his way through her mind regardless. But Meciél's previous cautions on how easily it could be to inflict mental trauma on both the victim and the attacker kept him at bay, and in the end he lowered his wand and sighed.

"Fine," he said grumpily. He stalked back over to the chairs and flopped himself down in one, muttering "sook" under his breath.

"So," Amanda said cheerfully as Harry stalked over to the chairs. "What did you think?"

"Well, your technique was sloppy and your performance was poor," Harry started with a grin. "On the plus side, you didn't spit..."

"Is there a chance that you could not be a pervert for just one minute?" Amanda asked in exasperation.

"Okay," Harry shrugged and Amanda blinked. He turned around and looked at her inquisitively. "So, what did I think about what?"

"Er...yesterday," Amanda said slowly. "The duel. I used that spell you're always raving on about."

"Effodio," Harry supplied and she nodded quickly, a bright smile on her face. "Well, I think you're a complete and utter moron who was lucky that her hands weren't blown off."

"What?" Amanda said in surprise, almost flinching at his harsh tone. Harry noted a glimmer of hurt appear in her eyes as she took on a defensive stance, staring at him crossly. "What does that mean?"

“Okay, I might be able to learn powerful spells from a book but you can’t,” Harry said, jabbing her in the chest and making her squeak. “Clearly, you’re not me. For starters, I have a penis- and it’s big.”

Amanda stared at him with a disgusted expression.

“Hey, the minute’s over,” Harry said with a grin and she sighed. “Anyway, you don’t have what I have,” and he tapped the side of his head meaningfully. “You are, for all purposes, a normal young witch. That means you’re naturally pathetic. If that spell had backfired on you, well, you’d know it. So would the schmuck who’d have to piece you back together.”

“I...thought...” Amanda said hesitantly.

“There’s a reason kids have Professors,” Harry said dryly. “If you had wanted to learn the spell then all you had to do was ask.” He gave her a pointed look. “You know how I am with teaching you dark magic. It makes me all warm and tingly feeling inside.”

“I thought you said that it wasn’t dark magic,” Amanda said and she stared at Harry accusingly. The look of outrage on her face almost made Harry chuckle.

“It is according to the Ministry,” Harry shrugged carelessly. “Believe me, it can kill people.”

“You mean the same Ministry who doesn’t want us knowing powerful spells?” Amanda asked with a sardonic snort. “The same Ministry who’s trying to keep us at the bottom?”

“Who said that crap?” Harry snorted, rolling his eyes and feeling torn between irritation and snide amusement at Amanda’s words. Really, what moron really believed in that type of conspiracy bullshit?

“You did!” Amanda exclaimed after a moment’s pause. “Yesterday!”

“Oh,” Harry uttered and paused. He frowned and scratched his head. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Amanda nodded slowly, staring at Harry with a peculiar expression. She absently flicked her hair over her shoulder.

“It does sound like the sort of bullshit I’d pass around to shut people up,” Harry conceded. He frowned, genuine curiosity flickering over his face. “Why did you go behind my back about this spell?”

“What’s it matter to you?” Amanda snorted. She slid her wand in her robes and gazed at Harry definitely, a strange emotion making her expression seem dull. “Why do you care anyway?”

“Well, I don’t,” Harry admitted frankly. A tiny smile played on the end of his lips as he continued. “But you’ve gone and made me all excited and curious.”

“Harry, drop it,” Amanda said bluntly, bending over to gather her satchel of books from the ground. Harry watched her keenly, never one to deny an eyeful of female curves.

“What is it?” He pressed on, narrowing his eyes speculatively. He leaned forward in his chair, regarding Amanda with a broad grin.

“It’s nothing,” Amanda said sharply.

“C’mon,” Harry said teasingly and Amanda growled.

“I wanted to impress you!” the blonde-haired girl snapped, whirling around and jabbing her finger in Harry’s direction. “I’d thought you’d be pleased!”

The Room went silent as Harry started in surprise. He regarded Amanda with astonishment, his teasing grin. He paused, opened his mouth and then closed it again. Amanda flushed under his gaze and lowered her eyes, unconsciously smoothing down her skirt.

“Well,” Harry said after a moment’s pause. “It was a pretty good attempt.”

Amanda looked up, embarrassment giving way to surprise giving. A small grin played on her face as she peeked up at Harry from behind her bangs.

“Really?” She asked bashfully.

“Yeah,” Harry answered after a moment. He paused, feeling a little awkward and uncomfortable and hastily reasserted himself. “I mean, you could have blown yourself up so it’s a wonder that you’re still standing here, and, I’ll admit, I definitely wasn’t expecting it.”

“The look on your face was priceless,” Amanda said with hint of laughter in her voice. When Harry narrowed his eye she smoothed over her face and gave Harry a polite smile.

“Alright brat, you can go now,” Harry said after a moment’s silence. He frowned, his mind already working ahead. “Me and Meciél have to work on Operation ‘Ugly-Bitch-Gets-Raped’- and when I say raped, I mean anything and everything but. I wouldn’t touch that puckered arse-hole of flab if it meant killing the Pope himself.”

“Do I want to know?” Amanda wondered softly, staring at Harry strangely. She frowned, squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “No, I probably don’t.”

‘Operation ‘Ugly-Bitch-Gets-Raped’?’ Meciél repeated slowly. ‘The covert intelligence community hates you- you do realise that?’

‘I think it’s a perfectly good name for a covert operation,’ Harry defended, leaning back against the stone wall.

‘If you had your way, every new spell you learnt would be called the ‘blows-shit-up’ curse,’ Meciél said. ‘Or, in extreme cases, the ‘blows-lots-of-shit-up’ curse.’

‘It gets the message across, doesn’t it?’ Harry asked. He kept a sharp eye on the portrait across the hallway from him but the frame was empty, the occupant wandering out somewhere.

‘Perhaps,’ Meciél conceded. ‘But there’s a certain level of decorum that we must keep for these sorts of situations. You- wait.’

Harry paused, frowning as Meciél adjusted his senses, absorbing in sensory information that his brain couldn’t process. She studied it and Harry waited impatiently, idly tapping his fingers against the wall. A moment later Harry heard it, the loud and obnoxious laugh of the one he sought. He grinned and waited until the right moment before turning the corner.

Something collided into him, slick, small and platinum blonde, and Harry grunted, grabbing a fistful of the other boy’s robes and giving him a rough push. Malfoy managed to give off a startled yelp as he toppled to the ground, his robes flapping uselessly.

“Whoa, what the hell are you doing?” Harry spat out, his eyes glinting coldly as he regarded the fallen boy. His lips curled into a smile of dark amusement. “Well, apart from falling on your arse.”

Malfoy, for his part, looked absolutely furious as the two thick boys by his side helped him up. His pale cheeks were stained with red blotches and he glared at Harry, his sneer more pronounced than ever.

“Potter!” He snapped. “You dare lay your filthy half-blood hands on me?”

Harry stared at Malfoy incredulously, failing to suppress a small snigger as his ‘anger’ faded away. “Do you really speak like that all of the time?” he asked, rolling his eyes. “Because it’s kind of gay...”

“What are you doing, Potter!” Malfoy spat out. The two burly boys by his sides sneered and cracked their thick knuckles, trying their best to look menacing and intimidating.

“I’ll ask again,” Malfoy hissed. “What are you doing here?”

Harry glanced at both boys with a flat expression on his face. Considering that Harry had faced down demons, drakons, faeries,

vampires and dark lords, he could quite honestly say that two children didn't worry him at all.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Harry drawled. "I'm knocking down eunuchs and lardballs. Ten points if they fall flat on their arse, twenty if you make them cry."

Malfoy's eyes glittered, his teeth grinding in anger, and Harry felt a pang of amusement. Rage did not suit the almost-albino Slytherin, his pale cheeks approaching a blood-red colour and his breathing labouring to produce a rather annoying high-pitched whine.

"Don't!" Harry ordered coldly.

His arrogant smile disappeared in an instant as the two burly boys lumbered for him, their fists clenched. They paused at his command, glancing back at Malfoy for directions. The thin, pale blonde rolled his eyes and nodded impatiently and the two boys turned back to Harry, their piggy little eyes narrowing.

Harry whipped out his wand, his arm a literal blur as he levelled it at the first boy. Hellfire tinged in his mind as a crackling bolt of crimson magic burst forward, catching one of the boys in the chest. The boy gave a grunt, the force of the spell sending him off his feet and into one of the walls. He fell to the ground with a thunderous clash as Harry turned to the other, who was reaching into his robes. Harry waved his wand lazily and the boy howled as a whip-like crack shot through the air, an invisible force lashing against his hand with great force. His wand clattered to the ground and he backed away, clutching his sore fingers and glaring daggers at Harry.

"Ah, no," Harry said, making a mild tutting noise. Malfoy paused, his hand frantically patting his robe for his wand. Harry's eyes glittered as Malfoy slowly lowered his hand, eying the tip of Harry's wand with a sudden rush of fear.

"What do you want, Potter?" Malfoy hissed, his eyes darting to the lumbering figures on the ground. One of them was groaning, struggling to stand as vestiges of crimson energy sparked and

crackled around his form. The other was crouching by the wall, holding his hand with pain-filled eyes and glaring up at Harry.

“Hey, you bumped into me, eunuch,”:

“Stop calling me that,” Malfoy snapped. “I am not a eunuch!”

“I assumed from your girly voice that you were castrated before puberty,” Harry said mildly. Malfoy flushed. “I really don’t want to see you prove me wrong so, sure, whatever you say, you walking pile of hippogriff piss.”

Malfoy’s nostrils flared and his hand unconsciously crept for his robes, his eyes narrowed as genuine hatred burned within those pale orbs. Harry eyed the hand and smiled grimly.

“You know what, sure,” he said and lowered his wand. Malfoy paused, surprised by the unexpected development. “I tell you what. I’ll let you go for your wand and you can get a free shot, no holding back. Afterwards, I will proceed to turn you into some kind of carrot and feed you to a rabbit.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened and he licked his lips nervously. Harry nodded earnestly, gesturing at Malfoy to continue as he smiled derisively. With a sudden burst of determination, Malfoy reached into his robes and, with a dramatic flourish, pulled out...nothing.

“Very impressive,” Harry remarked dryly as Malfoy gaped at his empty hand. “I’m shaking in my boots over here. Are you sure I can’t surrender now and spare myself the agony of your powerful nothing.”

“What...?” Malfoy started, frantically patting his robes as he searched for his wand.

Harry watched as he scrambled for his satchel, ripping it open and emptying the contents onto the ground. Bottles of ink smashed as they hit the ground but Malfoy ignored the black liquid staining his robes and hands as he frenetically searched for his wand.

“Where’s my wand?” Malfoy hissed. He picked up a book, ‘Defensive Magical Theory’, and lobbed it at the large boy lying on his back. “You! Crabbe! Did you touch my wand?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Harry said and Malfoy, paused, glaring up at Harry with hate-filled eyes. “You don’t have a wand?” He lowered his wand and rolled his eyes. “You know what, I don’t have time for to duel a moron who can’t even find his own damn wand. That’s pretty pathetic, Malfoy- even the crappiest wizards know where their wands are.”

Harry turned around and walked away, snickering to himself as Malfoy started rounding into his two accomplices, his high-pitched whine echoing through the dungeons. He turned a corner and started heading back to the Great Hall.

‘How careless for him to lose his wand like that,’ Meciél remarked lightly.

“Yes,” Harry said, grinning in satisfaction. He reached up his sleeves and pulled out a slim wand, the one he had snatched from Malfoy when he had first bumped into him. “It’s very careless of him, isn’t it?”

He snorted in amusement, shaking his head and slipped the wand back into his robes. “And you said I’d look like Oliver Twist.”

‘You are British and you are an orphan,’ Meciél said. ‘I was merely pointing out the similarities.’

“Hang on, didn’t he go and live with a prostitute or something?” Harry asked, scratching his head in thought. A lecherous grin slipped over his face. “On second thoughts...”

‘Pervert,’ Meciél muttered into his ear, almost too soft for Harry to hear.

“Sorry?” Harry enquired pointedly.

‘Nothing,’ Meciél answered.

Harry rolled his eyes and turned a corner, only to come to a sudden halt as he almost ran into somebody else- this time, by accident. Professor Umbridge stared down at him with her cold eyes, a wide smile plastered over her flabby face.

"Professor," Harry greeted after a moments pause. "I was just thinking about you- all good things," he reassured her quickly with a brilliant smile

"I'm sure, Mr Potter," Umbridge said sweetly, her eyes running up and down him in a way that almost made him squirm. "Just what were you doing there in those dreadfully dreary dungeons?"

"You know, you're the second person to ask me that today," Harry mused. He smiled. "Well, I'm collecting donations for the annual Ministry Ball. Care to be a sponsor?"

"You shouldn't lie, Mr Potter," Umbridge said sharply. "I know for a fact that the Ministry doesn't have any balls."

Harry blinked and made an odd strangled sound in his throat, trying with all his might to suppress the bubbling laughter in his chest. Umbridge didn't seem to recognise the significance of what she had just said and stared down at Harry with narrowed eyes. In all fairness, his strained smile and purpling face would have looked quite odd to those out of the loop.

'I have no response to that,' Meciél murmured.

"Well," Harry coughed after a moment's pause. "That's...good to know." He let out another strangled cough. "Have a good day, Professor."

"I'm sure I will, Mr Potter," Umbridge said sweetly. The squat woman strolled off, leaving Harry alone.

"Oh, but I'm sure you won't," Harry muttered darkly, fingering Malfoy's wand beneath his robes.

"Good evening, dearies," Dolores greeted sweetly, plastering a smile over her face as she left the Great Hall. The group of third years

mumbled something back and quickly scurried away, no doubt conspiring to do mischief away from the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts.

Really, Dolores thought with a sniff of disdain, some of these little rascals needed to learn some proper manners. It was the muggleborns that were the rudest and she thought that they could stand to learn some of the etiquette that the more upstanding members of the Pureblood community displayed.

Dolores turned a corner and paused, narrowing her beady eyes and staring down the corridor. The lamps on one side of the corridor had been extinguished. She shook her head reproachfully, disgust welling up within her. The whole castle would fall to bits if that old fool Dumbledore had been allowed to have his way any longer.

She started to walk down the corridor, her mind elsewhere as she pondered the new Educational Decrees that she had to have the Ministry sign. The children were restless and too many of them still displayed loyalty, unconscious or not, to the old fool. What was worse, there were many who regarded Potter with awe or respect, his arrogance only reinforcing the tales of his skills and power. That blonde girl, the hang-on, was the worse and although Dolores had been reluctant to meet with Potter alone since that incident in detention, she had no qualms about taking her frustration and anger out on the American.

Potter- now there was a boy that Dolores could hate with ease. Despite his cordial attitude to her since the detention, Dolores could see the glint of darkness that lay beneath the boys icy emerald eyes. He was dark wizard, she was sure of it! She knew enough of dark magic to recognise the signs. So far it seemed that only Dumbledore and the Wardens (yes, she was quite aware of the White Council, although any attempts to find out more had been so far unsuccessful) had been able to keep a check on him.

Well, she thought firmly. When she became Headmistress, Potter was going to learn a thing or two about respect for his betters. His lazy and smarmy attitude would no longer be tolerated. She knew that he had somehow insulted her when he had met her earlier that

day but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out how. So caught up in her thoughts, Dolores failed to hear the almost-silent footsteps approaching from behind her.

"Ventungo!" Somebody hissed.

Dolores whirled around as the sound of the voice, opening her mouth to berate them endlessly, when a agonising sensation struck her in the abdomen. She doubled over, her loud scream ripping through the air and her wand shaking in her suddenly-pale knuckles.

"Navictus!" She screamed, brandishing her wand into the darkness form where the curse had come.

Light pooled into the tip of her wand a bight bolt of azure energy zapped forward, crackling against stone as it missed the unseen attacker completely. For an single moment, the darkened hallways was bathed in bright blue light and Umbridge caught a glimpse of fiery eyes wreathed in an cloud of shadow. Then white light exploded in her vision and she was hurled aside, her wand flying from her hands. She slammed into the ground, crying out in pain as anger and fear swelled within her.

"I am the Undersecretary of the Minister of Magic!" She shrieked, clambering for her wand, her flabby hand desperately patting down the stone floor. "You cannot do this to me!"

"But I can," somebody whispered menacingly, the voice too indistinct for Dolores to recognise. The High Inquisitor shuddered at the sound of a loud girly giggle and there was something frightening about the innocent sound. The fiery eyes gleamed and Umbridge caught a glimpse of a slim wand rising from the shadows.

"We all can," the voice whispered softly.

Dolores screamed as the wand flashed with a bright light, her skin suddenly exploding in a painful array of rashes and boils. She clutched at her face as the next hex causes blood to leak from the back of her eyes. Thankfully, for her, the next spell caused her to lapse into unconsciousness and she knew no more of the attack.

It had been a fun interlude, Harry mused as he stared down at the pox-covered Professor, idly twirling Malfoy's wand in his hand. His eyes gleamed behind the illusionary shroud around him and for a moment, he was tempted to cause some permanent damage to the ugly cow. Hellfire flickered in his mind but Harry suppressed it, whirling around as he heard running footsteps approach and disappearing behind one of the secret passageways. The wand clattered to the ground, the only trace that somebody had been there a few moments ago.

Dolores awoke to the sight of the hospital wing, a sympathetic nurse forcing a small vial of potion down her throat. Her body ached and her head was light, but a spark of fury ignited deep in her stomach as the school nurse began to remove the hexes from her person.

She would find out who had dared to attack her and she would make them pay. The fiery eyes flashed in her mind and she shuddered, fear coiling in her belly. Suddenly she felt a little less sure of herself and she shivered, draping the blanket around her and trying to remove those damning eyes from her mind.

A/N: Once again, thanks to DLP for thier contribution to this chapter, especially Eagelette and Warlocke for the grammar and spell checks. Thanks to nuhuh and Jon for thier help as well, although the latter should really stop gloating about it or else I'll...write him an angry letter or something.

The Christmas holidays came and went and the hustle and bustle of the premier magical school in England started up once more. The Professors were pushing the students harder than anything they had experienced before and Harry could see that most of them were struggling to get past the piles of homework that they received each day. Ron, somebody Harry knew to be quite anti-book, spent most of his time in the common room mumbling to himself with a copy of The Standard book of Spells (Grade 5) tucked under his nose. Hermione was rarely seen without a pile of parchment and a quill in her hand to the point where she had developed a permanent ink stain on her index finger. Amanda looked more and more stressed out as the days went by and had taken to chewing her nails nervously and Harry wouldn't have been surprised if she started developing grey hairs and wrinkles.

If she didn't, well, Harry knew a few spells.

Harry himself was taking it pretty easy and while the fifth and seventh years stressed out (apparently the latter had some kind of exam named after a lizard- Harry was constantly amazed at the wand-wizards ability to make everything sound stupid), he could be found in the Common Room with a relaxed expression on his face, idly reading through Dumbledore's tome or throwing pieces of scrunched-up parchment at first years- much to the annoyance of practically everybody else. From what Meciél had gleaned from the Fifth Year syllabus, he was already more than capable of passing his OWLs with above average marks and hence, keep his neck safe from decapitations.

If there was one thing that occupied the Gryffindor Tower and Hogwarts as a whole more than schoolwork, it was definitely Umbridge and the prank that had gone so very wrong. A couple of Ravenclaw Third Years had been the first to discover Umbridge's

pox-ridden, pus-filled, partially-transfigured body lying unconscious in one of the hallways. The fact that Malfoy's wand had also been found discarded at the scene was a carefully-hidden secret, so it was only natural that the whole school knew about it by lunchtime. It was also known- and this was what made him snigger- that Harry had been called into Dumbledore's office to testify for Malfoy.

Harry was led through a series of hallways that were rapidly becoming familiar to him. Professor McGonagall strode next to him, her prim face tight with an unidentifiable emotion. Harry both looked and felt bored, his body automatically going through the motions of walking and his mind occupied elsewhere

'...I'm just saying, if we could find a way to anchor the spells for a longer period of time, we'd practically have an army to do what we want,' Harry thought.

'You're not the first to have this idea,' Meciell said dryly. 'Several wizards, both wand-wielders and White-Council, have tried to construct an automated army before. In fact, I suspect the suits of armour we see in the castle can be animated and ordered to attack if the need arose.'

'See,' Harry crowed as he and McGonagall turned a corner. At the end of this corridor, Harry could see the big and grumpy-looking gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

'For starters, such magic is only capable by wizards wielding the highest calibre of Transfiguration,' Meciell said. 'And you are not at that level just yet. For another, these suits of armour reside in one of the most magical locations in all of Europe, which no doubt helps keep the enchantments on them from decaying.'

"I'm just saying," Harry muttered sourly and McGonagall paused as they neared the gargoyle.

She gave him a sidelong glance, more puzzled than annoyed, but Harry ignored it as she opened the stone gargoyle and he strode up the stairs. He entered the familiar office, idly noting that Fawkes was absent as usual and that Dumbledore had visitors. The Headmaster

himself was sitting behind his desk and his eyes were twinkle-less as he stared at Harry. Only the Denarian caught the knowing look in the elderly wizard's glance and he frowned, breaking the stare and glancing at the other occupants of the room.

Two crimson-robed Aurors, a tall dark-skinned man that Harry remembered seeing at Grimmauld Place and a shorter, tougher-looking wizard with balding grey hair and perpetually-narrowed eyes, stood before him. Both turned to stare at him, the former with detached politeness and the latter with suspicion. Sitting in between them was Draco Malfoy, his eyes rimmed with red and his face pale.

"Mr. Potter?" The dark-skinned wizard- Kingsley, if Harry recalled properly- asked him, as if he had never seen the boy before in his life.

"You better have a good reason for calling me here," Harry scowled in annoyance. "I was having a nice little menstruation session that you interrupted."

The grey-haired wizard choked and McGonagall, who had just come up behind him, let out an audible gasp. Harry paused, a satisfied expression on his face, and made a show of frowning and scratching his head.

"Or is the word 'masturbation'?" He mused idly. He shrugged and turned back to the Aurors, noticing the twitch of amusement from Kingsley's lips. "Whatever it was, it involved my penis, my left hand, a tub of whipped cream and my Defence against the Dark Arts textbook."

"As amusing as this is," Dumbledore broke in quietly. "I'm afraid we'll need to hurry this along. Mr Malfoy is quite anxious to hear of the innocence- or guilt- of his son. Harry, could you please take a seat?"

Harry shrugged and, Hellfire wrapping around his mind and Meciél guarding his consciousness, he sat down in one of the chairs and placed his feet up on the Headmasters desk. He looked nonplussed when the grey-haired Auror shot a look at Dumbledore, wondering how the old man was going to take it. Dumbledore merely smiled.

"Thank you, Harry," he said cheerfully. "I shall leave Auror Dawlish and Auror Kingsley to ask the questions. Rest assured, as a former representative of the Wizengamot, I will make sure that your rights are upheld to the letter of the law."

The grey-haired Auror, obviously Dawlish, nodded at Kingsley and caught Harry's eyes. Harry stared back, a small and amused smile on his face.

"Are you aware that last night, Professor Umbridge was attacked and subjected to several nasty- and some illegal- hexes and curses?" Dawlish asked slowly.

"Everybody in the school is aware," Harry answered. He cocked his head. "I think you can hear the parties from here if you listen real close."

"She remains in the hospital wing, being tended to by licensed healers from Saint Mungo's," Dawlish continued, his voice rising slightly and an annoyed flush of colour appearing at the side of his neck.

"Absolutely fascinating, please, continue," Harry said blandly.

"When the scene of the crime was searched, a wand was found," Dawlish continued. His eyes flicked to Malfoy, who paled and swallowed. "Upon examination of the wand, it was determined that it was the wand that was used to attack Professor Umbridge."

Harry slowly patted down his pockets, as if reassuring himself that his own wand was still there.

"Again, I'm just riveted," Harry said slowly. He pulled out his own wand and waved in front of the Auror's face, pretending to be oblivious to the way that both men tensed up. "But I have my wand, so it wasn't me."

"You misunderstand the purpose of this meeting," Kingsley said softly in his deep baritone. "The wand found was Draco Malfoy's. He has protested his innocence and claims that he lost his wand sometime

before lunchtime yesterday. He also says that you can support his claim.”

“Support his claim?” Harry echoed carefully, eying Malfoy with glinting eyes. “I didn’t touch his wand, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Nobody is suggesting that you did,” Kingsley said quietly. “Mr Malfoy claimed that you and he had an altercation sometime after lunch yesterday, and that was unable to procure his wand during that time. Is that true?”

Harry paused and switched his gaze to Malfoy, who gazed at him expectantly. There was a certain pleading in his eyes that made Harry’s lips twitch in amusement.

“Potter!” Dawlish barked but Harry ignored him, his gaze still locked on Malfoy.

The platinum-blond boy had a look of dawning horror overtaking his face and beads of sweat were forming around his forehead as if he had suddenly realised that Harry might not help him at all. Harry kept his eyes locked onto Malfoy’s and a sinister grin flashed across his face, making Malfoy flinch. The Denarian turned back to Dawlish, who was eying him impatiently, and rolled his eyes, affecting an air of boredom.

“Yeah, I met Malfoy near the dungeons after lunch,” he said, snorting derisively. “The little shit had the nerve to insult me but chickened out of a duel, saying he couldn’t find his wand. I mean, what kind of wizard loses his wand? Even the most pathetic and weak wizards know where their wands are.”

Malfoy flushed, glaring at Harry with a mixture of hatred and relief. He hurriedly turned his head towards Kingsley and Dawlish, who were frowning and muttering to each other in low tones.

“As you see, gentlemen,” Dumbledore said loudly, gaining the attention of both Aurors. At that time, Harry slowly and carefully sidled next to Malfoy, placing his lips near the haughty boy’s ear.

"You owe me," he breathed in softly and a dark flash of satisfaction flared in his chest as Malfoy started, staring daggers at Harry but reluctantly jerking his head. Harry smiled ominously and leaned back, a satisfied expression on his face.

"...we have eye-witness testimony that supports Mr. Malfoy's account of events," Dumbledore was saying. Kingsley was nodding but Dawlish had a furious expression on his face, as if somebody had just kicked him in the balls and gotten away with it. "An eye-witness with a profound dislike of Mr. Malfoy, no less..."

"Surely..." Dawlish started.

"You have the wrong person," Dumbledore said sharply and Dawlish stilled, reluctantly nodding his head. Dumbledore's face transformed back into the benign appearance that Harry was familiar with. "I will, of course, assist the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as best I can. However, given the number of students with less-than-friendly attitudes towards Professor Umbridge and the lack of evidence, I'm afraid that we may never find out who attacked her."

Kingsley and Dawlish nodded, both looking unhappy. Dumbledore made a slight motion with his head and McGonagall cleared her throat, glancing down at Harry with a neutral expression.

"If that is all you need of Mr. Potter, then I believe he is needed back in class," she said in clipped tones. Kingsley nodded and McGonagall motioned for Harry to follow her as the two of them left the office.

'I'll admit that I felt extraordinarily proud of you at that moment,' Meciél murmured, throwing Harry out of his reflections. 'The greatest irony is that Malfoy believes that you have saved him when it was you who framed him in the first place.'

Harry grinned, glancing around at the virtual beach that his mind was currently occupying and took a sip from his cold drink. The sun beat down on him in a pleasant ray of warmth and he sighed, leaning back in his deck chair and idly gazing at a large dinosaur grazing at the palm trees nearby.

“Did you ever have a dinosaur host?” Harry asked curiously. It certainly was a large dinosaur, twice as big as a normal house with leathery grey skin and a back full of ridges. Its eyes were alert but without the sentience that made humans what they were.

“Of course not. I was not imprisoned until quite some time after,” Meciél said, her illusion appearing next to the dinosaur. She stroked its hide with the back of her hand, her silver and white dress rippling in the breeze. “I was part of the host that cleared this world of these beasts. It was an experiment that the higher ups decided to...scrap, for lack of a better word.”

“So there was no asteroid?” Harry asked and snorted. “Primary school fails me again.”

“Oh, there was an asteroid,” Meciél said and her silver eyes glimmered. She gestured to the sky with curved lips and Harry glanced up, noticing that it was approaching dusk. He also noticed that there was no moon. “Where do you think the moon came from? Trust me; I know this entire world’s secret.”

“You’re old,” Harry muttered, shaking his head in amusement. Meciél smiled and strode over to Harry’s deck chair. “You should put some wrinkles and grey hair on that face of yours, you know, to show it off.”

“Oh?” Meciél uttered and something in her voice made Harry suddenly feel wary.

“Hey,” he said defensively, throwing up his hands as if to ward off attack. “Some cultures regard age as a sign of wisdom and respect.”

“Your culture, if I recall correctly, regards nubility and attractiveness as a sign of sexual desirability,” Meciél said, arching an eyebrow. “Or were you not salivating over my breasts some time ago?”

“Boobies,” Harry droned with a lecherous grin and flexed his fingers. Meciél stared at him, unbidden laughter rising in her throat as she regarded him with great amusement and fondness.

"I'll tell you this," Meciél said, her face stretched in a very attractive smile. She stood next to Harry and a white deck chair suddenly appearing on the sandy beach. Meciél lay down, her white and silver dressed replaced with a bikini that made Harry stare. "You are certainly one of the most enjoyable and unique hosts that I have ever possessed."

"Possessed?" Harry said challenging, cocking her an arrogant grin. "Who pays rent here, huh? I loan you a spare bit of my brain. Technically, I could make you live in my spleen."

"Technically, you couldn't," Meciél said. "Oh, and my eyes are up here."

"Uh huh," Harry said with a grin. "So, impressed with my diabolical plan, were you?"

"Quite so," Meciél said and paused. "Eyes, Harry?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure they're nice and I'll get to them in a second," Harry said, waving her off with a dismissive gesture of his hand.

Meciél rolled her eyes- a habit she had picked up from Harry no doubt- and suddenly her bikini and generous cleavage was replaced with her silver and white dress. She cocked her head, as if listening to something that Harry couldn't hear.

"Spoilsport," Harry pouted, folding his arms grumpily.

"You might want to listen to this," Meciél advised.

The beach suddenly shattered, as if it were a mirror that had just been dropped, and Harry blinked rapidly, his perceptions warping back to that of reality in a single instant. He squinted and rubbed his eyes, wincing when a sudden rush of talk and laughter struck his ears. He was sitting in the Great Hall with his head in his arms. He shook his head, glancing down at his empty plate, and focussed when Meciél gave him a mental nudge.

“...it’s a useful spell,” Amanda was saying, speaking to Hermione in hushed tones. “It’d be really useful for the DA to learn; especially if some of them are ever surrounded by Death Eaters or other dark wizards.”

“I don’t like it,” Hermione said, her voice crisp. “The spell’s too violent. All of the spells you get from him seem a bit...well, a bit dark.”

“You believe me, right? You believe my dad about Voldemort?” Amanda pressed and Harry saw Hermione wince at the name and give a tight nod from the corner of his eye, giving him a sidelong glance that he pretended to miss.

“When he reveals himself then it’s going to be like a war,” Amanda said quietly, shuddering at the thought but pressing on, “The people in the DA are the ones who are going to be targeted. They’ll need every edge they can get.”

“I suppose,” Hermione said after a moment, her voice reluctant.

Whatever she said next was drowned out by the sudden screech of owls. Harry winced and glanced up, seeing the morning post owls soaring down from the rafters in the Great Hall and towards their respective owners. He hastily moved his plate under the table as an owl glided by, remembering the day before when one of the owls had taken a crap all over his fried eggs- and he hadn’t noticed.

Meciel sniggered at that thought and Harry gave her a mental prod.

‘You could have warned me,’ he thought sourly.

‘Where would the fun be in that?’ Meciel asked with a tittering laugh.

Harry lifted up his plate and pushed it away, his appetite vanishing. With a scowl at the nearest owl and a brief mental rundown of just how loud the thing would screech once Harry was done with it, Harry stood up and strode from the Great Hall.

‘What are your plans for Malfoy?’ Meciel asked curiously. Harry knew that she could have delved into his mind, plucking the information out

whenever she wished, but Meciél was a strong believer in the Old Ways and common courtesy.

‘I dunno,’ Harry shrugged, sidestepping a pair of First Years and walking into the entrance hall. ‘I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I’m sure you could come up with something.’

‘He isn’t of much use to us at the moment,’ Meciél observed. ‘Of course, if you listen to Weasley and half the Gryffindors, Malfoy’s father is apparently a high-ranking Death Eater. We should keep that in mind.’

Harry grunted and glanced out one of the windows near the main doorways. Winter was blowing away faster than usual and Harry could already see that most of the snow had melted, leaving muddy puddles of water, clumps of grass and weeds poking out from them. His mind elsewhere, Harry almost didn’t notice the owl sitting at the window ledge, staring at him with unblinking yellow eyes.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Harry muttered, scowling at the owl.

There was no letter attached to its leg, so Harry shooed it away with his hand. The owl bristled, flaring its wings and flapping above the window ledge for a few moments. Suddenly and without warning, just as Harry was turning away from it, it gave a loud piercing screech and dove for him. Harry saw a flash of colour coming for him and it was only his superior reflexes that kept him from losing an eye as he turned his head, sharp talons raking across his hairline and ripping out a few hairs.

As it soared past, Harry spun around, Hellfire rushing into his body as he levelled his wand- which appeared in his hand in a blur of movement- at the owl. With a single sharp word, the tip of the wand glowed with an eerie candescence and a bolt of crackling red light shot out, striking the owl with unnerving accuracy. There was a pained screech that was abruptly cut off and Harry watched with a cold glint in his eyes as a pile of feathers, some more bloodied than others, drifted to the ground- the last remains of the owl.

“Fucking owls,” he growled under his breath.

Still, there was a slight smile of satisfaction and enjoyment on his face as he welcomed his old friend adrenaline back into his body.

‘What was that about?’ Meciél wondered.

“I hate owls,” Harry growled, twirling his wand in his hand. He scanned the small bloody smear that remained of the owl with a disgusted expression on his face. “Flea-ridden, feathery little sons-of-bitches...”

‘I do not think owls have a flea problem,’ Meciél said slowly. ‘However, I suggest you look to your left through the corner of your eye. I only advise this because there are two more owls on the windowsill.’

Harry slowly turned his head, meeting the unblinking stare of two more birds, one large with tawny feathers and the other a beautiful snowy one. They made no noise; there were no hoots or movements, they merely sat there and stared at Harry as if possessed.

‘There are three more in the other windowsill behind you. I heard them fly in,’ Meciél said and paused. ‘Be careful, beloved, they just might be.’

“Be what?” Harry said as he spun around, a perpetual scowl on his face as he fingered his wand. “Tomorrow night’s dinner?”

‘No, possessed,’ Meciél said. ‘Vesper has a way with birds.’

The sound of a dozen flapping wings quickly caught Harry’s attention and he glanced up, noticing that some owls had slipped out of the Great Hall and were perched in the giant wooden rafters of the Entrance Hall. He turned his head and blinked in surprise. Where there had been two birds on the window ledge, there were now six, all crammed in together with unblinking eyes of the same shade of yellow.

“This isn’t going to go well,” Harry remarked cheerfully as another dozen owls fluttered into through the main doors.

‘Worried?’

“Oh, I mean for them,” Harry said, his smile never leaving his face as more and more owls dove in from the Great Hall or the open doors.

There was a lapse in movement and suddenly every single avian head swung towards him, the same disturbing glint coming over all of their amber eyes. Suddenly, the owls reared their wings, screeched in unison and dove as one for all directions.

“Tutamen atra flamma!” Harry said coldly.

The power that rushed through him was anything but the chill of his tone, a fiery maelstrom of darkness and power that spread through his wand, the runes glittering with unholy light, and poured out into a massive rush of flames. Scarlet and purple flames roared as the blazing loop of fire surrounded him. The owls screeched in agony as they dove into the fire, mindful of the pain but too determined or driven to stop. Feathers and flesh quickly became ash and the smell of sizzling meat filled the air above the raw scent of sulphur.

“Smells like chicken,” Harry muttered thoughtfully, his wand pulsing in his hands as more and more owls dove into his impenetrable barrier of fire by the dozens.

‘We should have a taste,’ Meciell observed and Harry felt her assessing the situation, deeming it more irritating than harmful. ‘If there’s anything left, of course.’

The rest of the owls continued to bombard the fiery barrier, being reduced to ash in a matter of seconds. The last few tried to veer upwards but only one made it, its amber eyes gleaming with a rage that the creature was unable to naturally feel. It soared over the flames and dove down feet first, talons extended as it prepared to gouge out Harry’s eyes.

Unfortunately, for the bird at least, Harry was faster and, with his right hand still clasped to his wand, his left arm shot up and grabbed the bird by the neck. With a sharp squeeze, he snapped the owl’s neck and casually tossed it aside, wiping his hand on his robe as he

lowered the wand. The fire disappeared and Harry stepped out into the lingering heat, eying the scattering of ash that littered the floor.

There was a loud cough and Harry whirled around, his eyes narrowed dangerously. Dumbledore ignored the wand that was levelled at him as he slipped the Great Hall doors shut behind him. His eyes took in the ash on the ground, lingering over the broken and crumpled body of the owl that Harry had wrung. The Headmaster raised an eyebrow but didn't say a word as he gave Harry a pointed look.

"Yeah, alright," Harry muttered sourly, pocketing his wand.

He released his grip on Hellfire and the dark power flowed back into the void. Scowling, he walked across the entrance hall and reacquainted himself with the various passageways and corridors that lead to the Headmasters office.

"I'm sure you have an interesting explanation to the question I'm about to ask," Dumbledore said quietly as he moved across his office and sat down behind his desk.

Harry took his usual seat by the bookshelf, which gave him a clear view of the office door, the portraits, Fawke's perch (although the summer Fae was absent yet again) and Dumbledore.

"Probably Vesper," Harry shrugged carelessly. "She gets a hard-on for birds, apparently."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose.

"Hard-on?" He repeated curiously. "I'm afraid I haven't come across that term before, although I am certain I get the gist of it."

"Yeah," Harry said and paused. "Dumbledore, if you don't know what that means then you're way too old."

"It's been brought to my attention before," Dumbledore said with a soft chuckle. His smile disappeared and he became more pensive. "The owls did seem curiously subdued this morning. Vesper is more

resourceful than I believed. I thought I had erected wards and placed spells to cover every eventuality.”

“You can never cover every eventuality,” Harry scoffed. Dumbledore smiled. “There’s always some crazy fucker who’s prepared to do something so stupid that it often works. Usually it’s me, actually.”

“It will not happen again,” Dumbledore said firmly and Harry nodded, feeling satisfied. “I will ward the owls from any further intrusions such as this- after I purchase the new owls, of course.”

“Not my problem,” Harry said edgily, fidgeting in his seat.

“I am curious though,” Dumbledore said pensively, steeping his fingers together and peering at Harry over his half-moon glasses. “Did Vesper truly believe that this attack would harm you? While surprising, it is hardly threatening to those your level of skill.”

“I almost lost an eye,” Harry protested. He gestured to his hair. “And look at that! How can I woo your innocent little schoolgirls when big crazy owls are swooping in and taking clumps of my hair?” He rolled his eyes theatrically as Dumbledore smiled in amusement. “Besides, it had nothing to do with killing me- although I’m sure she would have tried if she could have gotten past your wards any other way.”

“You believe she wasn’t trying to harm you?” Dumbledore asked in puzzlement.

“Of course she was,” Harry said and gave Dumbledore a dark smile. “The anorexic bitch hates Meciell. I’m just saying, this was more about reminding me that she’s still alive and kicking- and probably waiting to kill me too.”

“So Vesper- and Voldemort to a certain degree- are showing an increased willingness to flaunt their power,” Dumbledore mused carefully. “This is interesting, very, very, interesting.”

“Then the prophecy has been fulfilled,” Harry said ominously and clasped his hands together. “And the Chosen One must find the Sword of Fate to complete his Destiny.”

"What?" Dumbledore said sharply and Harry blinked, staring at the old man curiously. "What are you talking about, Harry? What prophecy? What sword?"

"Nothing," Harry said with a shrug, giving Dumbledore a pointed smile. "I just figured it was finally my chance to say something dramatic for once."

"I see," Dumbledore said slowly and something like relief flashed through his eyes. Harry frowned, his mind whirring, but Dumbledore's next comment pushed the elderly wizard's strange reaction out of his mind and made him wince.

"There is, of course, the matter of Professor Umbridge," Dumbledore said, eying Harry carefully. Harry plastered as much innocence as he could fake onto his face and stared Dumbledore straight in the eye.

"Yes, such a tragedy," he said slowly.

"You shouldn't have done that," Dumbledore chided severely, but his twinkling eyes and twitching lips contradicted his tone.

"She deserved it," Harry said, dropping any last vestige of innocence and staring at Dumbledore defiantly.

"Why did you do it, Harry?" Dumbledore asked and his smile disappeared. He suddenly looked very weary. "If you had been caught -and I assure you that if your concealment charms had been a tad-less than they were, you would have been- you would have been sent to Azkaban. I'm sure that not even the White Council would wish to pursue you there, but I'm also sure that you would not want to visit that island in the first place."

"I dunno," Harry shrugged, meeting Dumbledore's gaze with a bold stare. "She's a bitch? She had it coming? I was bored?"

"You were bored?" Dumbledore repeated.

“Look,” Harry said, visibly agitated. Frustration threatened to raise his voice and he suppressed it harshly, determined not to show any weakness in front of this man. “I’m not like you.”

“I had noticed,” Dumbledore said dryly.

“This place is boring to me,” Harry said bluntly. “Studying and practising new spells, no matter how cool they are- nice book, by the way...”

Dumbledore accepted the compliment with a nod of his head, looking as if listening to Harry rant was the most important thing in the world to him.

“It’s boring,” Harry said and growled, slamming his hands down on the arms of his chair. “Dammit, do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had any fun? Hell, today was the most exciting I’ve had in months.”

“Somebody tried to kill you,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Other people would not find that exciting.”

“That’s the thing,” Harry exclaimed and jabbed his finger in Dumbledore’s direction. “People have always been trying to kill me. When I was a kid, I was always on the lookout for Denarians or Wardens or any other supernatural bastard looking to off me. It was fun- especially when they found me!”

“You miss the rush of battle” Dumbledore said in dawning understanding.

“Give me a nest of Denarians, or Death Eaters, or Red Court Vampires or...” Harry struggled, biting his lips. “Give me anything that I can kill and I’ll have a ball. If you know the names of a few Death Eaters, give them to me and I’ll track ‘em down and do what needs to be done.”

Dumbledore looked pensive, his fingers steepled together as he stared at Harry over his glasses with unfathomable eyes. Just when

the stare was beginning to get uncomfortable, Dumbledore sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"I understand how you feel, Harry," he said and ignored Harry's scoff of derision. "I, too, was young once- although it must be hard to believe. I went through a phase much like yours, although I will admit that I was a tad bit older and a tad less bloodthirsty than you were. But you must focus on your goal, and that is to stay alive."

"No need to lecture me," Harry grumbled, settling back in his seat. "I know why I need to be here but I don't have to like it. In fact, I could say that I'm under an obligation to hate it."

"Understandable," Dumbledore said with twinkling eyes. He took off his glasses and absently polished them on the sleeve of his robe. "Believe me, Harry, I have been thinking of your role working with the Order of Phoenix once you have completed your OWLs. I admire the men and women who have the fortitude to stand against the darkness, but I will admit that there are very few of them who could stomach the total necessity for war."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked curiously.

"We- I," Dumbledore corrected slowly, "made mistakes when dealing with Voldemort in the past. Given his strength now, I can no longer afford to make those mistakes."

He placed his glasses back on his eyes and glanced down at Harry. Despite himself, Harry shivered, seeing a dark look in the professor's eye that he had never associated with the Headmaster before.

"In the coming years, I will need somebody of your skills and..." Dumbledore paused. "...a certain moral flexibility...to do what needs to be done as quickly and as quietly as possible. Until then, you must focus on what needs to be done at this very moment, and that is to pass your OWLs. You say you lack excitement, Harry. Trust me, savour boredom for as long as you can."

“Creepy,” Harry said slowly and stood up, eyeing Dumbledore peculiarly. A slow grin stretched across his face. “You know, it’s moments like these that I just know we’re going to be great allies.”

“Ah yes, allies,” Dumbledore mused, as if something had just occurred to him. “I have spoken with Professors McGonagall and Snape and passed on my instructions but I shall ask you a favour as well. The situation is looking grim and I fear I shall not be Headmaster for much longer...”

“What!” Harry exclaimed sharply. “Hang on, if you leave and a Ministry lackey comes in, I might be expelled and if I’m expelled without my OWLs, I’m a dead man!”

“I know,” Dumbledore said patiently. “I have already ensured that your place here at Hogwarts will be relatively secure. I have contacts close to Minister Fudge insuring that he will not act against you until after you have taken your OWLs. He, of course, believes it is in his best interest to wait.”

“Sneaky,” Harry commented quietly. He cocked his head and winced when he felt Meciél’s pointed nudge. “Okay, what’s the favour? Beware, anything to do with your flabby and wrinkled arse will see me in therapy for a very long time.”

“Should I be forced to leave, I ask that you watch over the students here at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said and smiled faintly at Harry’s puzzlement. “Not as a Professor, of course, but as a warrior. I do not believe Voldemort would attack here but if he does, then you are to secure the safety and escape of the students before anything else.”

“I can do that,” Harry said slowly.

“Before anything else,” Dumbledore emphasised slowly. “No matter how bored you are.”

“Fine,” Harry said irritably, rolling his eyes. “It’s a deal. You make sure I don’t get expelled and I’ll make sure the bad guys don’t hurt the students as long as I’m here.”

"Thankyou, Harry," Dumbledore said and the Denarian was honestly puzzled to see something like relief in the man's expression. "I think that is all for now."

Harry frowned and spun around to leave. Just as he was about to exit the door, he paused and turned back.

"I need to open a summoning circle to the Nevernever," he declared. "I want to get some information about this latest attack, see what Vesper's up to, perv in the girl's showers, that sort of thing."

"I shall arrange it in the same place as last year," Dumbledore agreed.

Harry gave a nod of thanks and left the room.

"Do we have any fruit?" Meciél asked as Harry bustled around his dormitory.

"I have...two chocolate frogs and a bag of "Bertie Bott's Every Flavour beans," Harry recited, staring at the small bug with disgust. "I tried one of the green ones. I'm pretty sure it was raw sewage."

"Lovely," Meciél said wryly, her illusion seated at his bed. Her silver eyes were locked onto the small and heavily enchanted foot-locker at the end of the bed.

"I'm afraid to try the white ones," Harry said absently, dropping to his knees and checking under his bed. "There aren't a lot of things that you can eat that are white, if you get what I'm saying."

"I think so," Meciél said distractedly. She pointed at the chest. "I think you might want to open this, Harry."

Harry frowned, suddenly aware of the nagging, itching feeling he was getting at the pit of his stomach. It had been months since he had felt it but he recognised it all the same and groaned.

"You have got to be kidding me," he snapped. He whipped out his wand and opened the chest with a single flick.

Inside were a few of his clothes, a sack of gold (that Harry had cursed so that only he could touch it), a pair of thick leather gloves and the cane-like sheath for the Sword of the Cross. It was trembling slightly, an almost-unnoticeable pulse of silver light licking at the handle.

"I thought I'd broken this thing," Harry muttered sourly, gingerly prodding the cane with his wand. He was wise enough to put on the two thick leather gloves before he picked up the sheath.

'I believe you would know if you had destroyed the blade,' Meciél murmured, her illusion vanishing, her disdain and repulsion for the weapon making her instinctively retreat to the furthest reaches of Harry's mind, her voice gaining a barely-noticeable echo to it.

"Well, it hasn't made a single peep since I got here," Harry said slowly.

'Perhaps you're exactly where it wishes you to be?' Meciél proposed.

Harry glared at the sword but a grim smile crossed his face and he suddenly felt a rush of anticipation. He slung the sheath over his shoulder and with a flick of his wand, gathered the materials he needed to make a summoning circle. He strode from the dormitory, the materials obediently floating behind him and left the Gryffindor Tower, ignoring the two Third Years who gaped at the strange sight.

"It's all good, Meciél," Harry said as he quickly stamped down the moving staircase, absently ducking to avoid one of the ghosts. He ignored the exclamation of outrage behind him.

'You enjoy doing the mindless bidding of another?' Meciél asked and there was something in her voice that made Harry pause.

"I like doing something," Harry clarified and smiled grimly as he stroked the sheath around his shoulders. "With this, it generally means that after a few minutes I'm hacking something to death."

'Is there any other way?' Meciél sighed.

"With what?" Harry asked, turning a corner and approaching the classroom he wanted. It was the same classroom that Molly had used

to teach Alternative Magic and the Old World last year. He only hoped that Dumbledore had remembered to deactivate the wards for him.

‘Hack something,’ Meciél said.

“You could hack them into disability,” Harry said thoughtfully as he entered the room.

The classroom was mostly empty now, the chairs and tables gone and the blackboard covered with dust. Harry flicked his wand and the small pile of objects clattered to the floor. Another flick and a large piece of chalk floated up into the air and zoomed across the disused room and began tracing intricate lines into the floor.

“Hack them out of an arm and leg, hack them into next week, hack them into womanhood,” Harry continued idly, his wand swishing through the air as he broke up the small pieces of chocolate and levitated them into one of the school’s dinner bowls. He frowned at the measly pile. “I really need to find out where the kitchens are.”

‘I fail to see how you could hack somebody to womanhood,’ Meciél said, and Harry thought she was speaking mostly for the sake of idle conversation.

“Well, they start off as a man,” Harry said and gave a dark grin to nothing in particular. The piece of chalk was zooming across the floor now, drawing intricate lines and complex runes over the dusty floor. “I think you get the idea.”

‘I’m sure your penis is whimpering,’ Meciél remarked dryly as Harry banished the bowl of chocolate and sweets to the middle of the rapidly-expanding chalk circle. A moment later, the chalk clattered to the ground.

“I rule my penis,” Harry said with an air of pomposity. “It does not rule me.”

‘You had me fooled,’ Meciél muttered in amusement.

Harry rolled his eyes but stepped up and took a deep breath. Hellfire roared in his veins and he channelled it out, a rush of dark power sizzling the wood of his wand. He wove it carefully, his voice spilling out words of summoning and power as the runes on the floor started to glow with a hellish red light. With another deep breath, Harry called out the name of the Faerie he wished to summon. The name had an odd musical lilt to it and shivered in the air with binding spells, forcing the creature to obey the caster's call.

A moment later, there was a bright flash of light and a shower of silver motes fell to the ground as a tiny figure appeared, no larger there from the tip of his finger to his wrist. When the light dimmed, Harry's mouth opened in astonishment, looking and feeling quite surprised at what he saw. At the best of times, Cessbulby was an amusing distraction that Harry would admit that he was a little fond of. At the worst of times, she was a malicious little shit with a vicious streak that Harry couldn't even come close to approaching.

It seemed he had summoned her at one of those worst times. Her silver dragonfly-like wings were covered with a thick liquid that Harry immediately identified as some kind of gore. Her usual white dress had been replaced with some kind of icy-armour and she held a tooth-pick sized sword in her hand, also made of ice. The nimbus of ambient light that surrounded her was flickering with a dark, primal urge and she was growling under her breath, her tiny eyes alight with bloodlust.

"I had him!" Cess shrieked loudly, whirling around in a blur of silver wings. "Why did you take me away? I had him!"

"Cess?" Harry ventured after a moment, automatically checking to see if the circle still had its integrity.

Luckily for him the defensive wards were active as Cess blurred forward, slamming into a sparkling barrier of crimson light and bouncing off. Harry opened his mouth but winced when Cess tried it again, closing his mouth and eying Cess strangely. He had never seen this side of the Winter Fae so upfront.

"Is this a bad time?" Harry asked when Cess paused to take a breath, her bright soulless blue eyes glimmering with frustration.

"Yes!" Cess whined and stamped her foot- or would have stamped her foot if she hadn't been hovering in the air. "I have to protect the Lady! Send me back!"

"The Lady?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing. "You mean Maeve?"

Suddenly the sword that he had stuck at the back of his shoulders trembled and Harry felt an annoying itch dig into the pit of his stomach. A strong sensation bucked at his mind and he had already taken a step forward before he shrugged it off.

"Lady Maeve is under attack!" Cess shrieked. She paused and licked a splattering of blood off her sword, making a low noise of approval. "All Fae are to fight in her name!"

The sword trembled again and Harry growled in annoyance, struggling to reach over his shoulder and throw it aside. Cess took the chance to slam into the barrier again, letting out a loud inhuman shriek of frustration as the barrier flared again, red hues of light sparkling in the centre of the summoning circle.

'This is a surprise,' Meciél murmured. 'The Higher Ups obviously want you to participate in this battle.'

"Let me go!" Cess shrieked angrily but Harry ignored her, focussing his attention on Meciél.

"Why?" He asked bluntly.

'There could be a number of reasons,' Meciél said and Harry felt her wince when the sword shivered again. Something flashed in his veins and for a second, Harry was certain that he could hear a loud resounding trumpet note. Meciél recoiled and dug herself deeper into Harry's mind. 'It seems particularly insistent on this point.'

"What's in it for us," Harry muttered, rolling his eyes when Cess charged the barrier again.

‘Who knows?’ Meciél said wearily. ‘I’m sure there might be some sort of reward that you could get out of it. Fae are notorious for honouring their debts. Besides, you did say you were getting bored.’

The sword trembled again and fires of silver and hell clashed in Harry’s veins. Harry gritted his teeth and Meciél wordlessly hissed. It was the strongest summons that the sword had ever thrown at him.

‘The time may come when we must destroy this sword, regardless of its effectiveness against our enemies,’ Meciél muttered.

Harry nodded, his brows furrowed in concern, and turned back to the excitable and angry little faery. Cess was staring at him, trickles of ice flowing from her hands as she hurled icy blasts at the glimmering cylinder that separated her from Harry.

“Cess,” Harry called and sighed as the faery hurled another gobbet of tiny ice at the barrier. “Cess! You can calm down, I’m letting you go,” Cess paused, her eyes narrowing suspiciously as Harry paused and grimaced, “but I’m coming with you,” he finished.

“Oh!” Cess squealed and suddenly her bad mood vanished, a bright smile appearing over her blood-splattered face. “We can kill things together!”

“Yeah,” Harry muttered as he waved his wand, preparing to open a portal to the Nevernever. He didn’t continue his next sentence but allowed it to play in his mind as a slit of grey light appeared before him, like a visible tear in the very air itself, rapidly expanding out into what looked to be a doorway to a white arctic location. ‘I’m just wondering what side I’m fighting on.’

‘The side that tries to kill us is our enemy,’ Meciél advised as a bitterly icy wind slammed into Harry’s face, making him wince.

‘What if both sides attack us?’ He thought as he took a step towards the portal.

‘Then I suppose we’ll have a lot of enemies...’ Meciél started but the rest was drowned out as his mind became a blur of colour and sound as he was transported to Winter’s domain in the Nevernever.

A/N: Sorry for the lateness of the chapter. I was enjoying the most I could get out of the last of my holidays. I start uni tomorrow, so I'm going to need an outlet to keep myself interested. That's good news for you. Thanks to those at DLP who helped me with this chapter, even prodding me when I couldn't be stuffed. Here's Chapter 21. Enjoy.

The Nevernever was a realm of magic and power far older than that of Earth. Although the mortal realm and the magical realm existed side by side, the denizens of the Nevernever had existed long before man had begun to walk the Earth. There were creatures- and beings that didn't even deserve the classification of creatures- that resided in the Nevernever who had seen the dawn of man and had been thoroughly unimpressed when man had discovered the use of sticks as a means to poke things. Of course, when those sticks had turned into cold hard iron and steel, some of the creatures had taken notice. Iron was the bane of these creatures' magic and health and they abhorred and detested it.

These creatures, who occupied most of the Nevernever, were known as Fae. These were strange and inhuman creatures despite the upper echelons, such as the Sidhe, showing a remarkable resemblance to men and women- although they were undoubtedly more beautiful than the average mortal. The Fae had a unique system of obligation and debt that governed their immortal lives and Fae who owed a debt would as surely pay it as the sun would rise, no matter what the cost.

The Fae were split up into two different and distinct sides. There were the Seelie faeries, the Summer Fae, and there were the Unseelie Faeries, the Winter Fae. They were much like the season for which they had been named; Summer being warm, kind, empathetic and Winter being cold, beautiful, pitiless, and entirely without remorse. Despite their vastly different personalities, only a fool would willingly associate with either side, for the nature of all Fae was as utterly alien to humans as any possible creature that might live on Mars.

At times, the Courts went to war with each other, although the balance between them was always preserved. Each Court was also

ruled over by three different Sidhe. The lesser queen was known as the Lady, the ruling queen was known as the Queen and the former queen was known as the Mother. At the moment, the Winter Lady was Maeve- and it looked as if her own forces were blowing the crap out of her fortress.

“Fuck,” Harry swore under his breath, ignoring the bitter wind that dug into his face.

The ground and trees around him were covered with a white sprinkle of snow, ice and frost, gleaming crystal-like icicles protruding from the ground every few metres, making walking very difficult. In front of him loomed a castle of black ice, its spires soaring high up into the sky, where thick clouds rumbled ominously and a blizzard of snow and hail shot down to the ground furiously. Around the castle, the sky had turned to a furious red and ash replaced the blizzard, scorching ice and snow alike as the potent tang of black magic reeked through the air, noticeable to Harry even as he stood over a kilometre away. Around the looming barred gates, small armies fought one another furiously in a spectacular display of melee and magical warfare.

‘The invaders seem to be winning,’ Meciél noted as she focussed her attentions on the battle. A wave of puzzlement emanated from her presence in his mind. ‘This is strange. Several of the invaders seem to be from the Unseelie Fae.’

“Not that strange,” Harry muttered, barely aware when Cessbulby let out a squeaky little war-cry, brandished her small sword and buzzed down the hill towards the nearest enemy. “I thought infighting was pretty common around the Courts.”

‘Yes, but never has it degenerated into open warfare,’ Meciél mused. Harry felt her studying the sky. ‘Look at those clouds- and can you smell the sulphur? That is the work of a powerful Denarian.’

“Vesper,” Harry said grimly. The wind swept through the clearing and the bushes behind him rustled. “Well, at least we know who we’re meant to be killing. I suppose- Excracia!”

Harry whirled around, his wand blurring and Hellfire roaring through him, enhancing his natural power tenfold. The blast of yellow light that exploded from his wand crackled loudly as something jumped from the bushes, a four-legged creature with glowing red eyes and tough leathery skin. The creature was struck and flung aside, howling in agony, legs flailing uselessly as it gasped for breath. Harry flicked his wand sharply, his eyes cold, and the creature's neck shot to the side with a distinct snap.

"Hellhounds," Harry muttered as black oily smoke rose from the runes on his wand. "Denarian sniffers."

'So I was right,' Meciél said with an air of grim satisfaction. 'Perhaps we can destroy Vesper here, once and for all.'

The sword strapped to Harry's back quivered and a sudden emotion tugged at his heart, as if there was something vitally important that he needed to get to. Harry regarded the sword thoughtfully and gave the dead hellhound another glance before he turned back to the fortress of ice. It was at that exact moment that a bright flash exploded against the castle gates and Harry winced, instinctively ducking his head and gingerly clamping down on his ears as a terrible piercing whine resonated throughout the air. When he looked up, he saw the castle's gates, along with a large section of the thick walls, were gone.

"They've got some power behind them," Harry admitted grudgingly. Alone, he would have been hard-pressed to even deliver a tenth of the punch that had breached the fortress's walls.

The sword rattled in its sheath again as Harry glanced down at his robes. He grimaced, already feeling exposed without his defensively- charmed overcoat, which could deflect a sword thrust with considerable ease. As he turned to climb down the icy path, a silver blur shot up it and straight towards him. Harry was faster and a glimmer of crimson power wrapped itself around him. The blur struck the shield with an odd gong, bounced off, dropped to the ground and let out a loud and annoyed squeak.

“What are you doing, Cess?” Harry asked amusedly, staring down at the little Faery. Cess was shaking her head, her little silky pink mane covered in snow.

“I got orders,” she said sadly, her silver wings buzzing as she flew up to Harry’s eye-level. “I have to show you a way past the army and into the Lady’s fortress.”

“Orders from who?” Harry asked suspiciously, automatically adjusting his stance as a loud rumble tore through the ground.

“Orders,” Cess said remorsefully.

Her next words were drowned out as lightning flashed through the clouds, a series of successive blasts that tore through the ground near the citadel. Thunder boomed an instant later, a concussive wave of sound that shot through the air, causing the trees to shudder under its strength. From one of the large spiked spires, a misty haze of potent blue and white light was forming, and it shot down at the approaching army with great force. At the same time, the ash-filled clouds surrounding the area’s last bastion of Winter’s power as the darkness swirled and rumbled ominously. From it came a giant ball of fire, so bright that Harry had to turn his eyes away.

The two blasts collided in a spectacular clash of light and sound, streaks of power crashing against each other. Streaks of red and blue light surrounded each other, binding and twisting and flailing, until both blasts were rolled up into a blazing ball of light. The light collapsed, growing smaller and smaller, then exploded with a deafening roar, erupting into a sphere of pure destructive power. The arc of the explosion tore through the citadel, slicing through the walls and towers. With a terrible groan, two of the jagged spires toppled as they were severed in half, slamming into both the defending and attacking army.

“Fucking hell!” Harry hissed, his eyes wide open with shock. On his shoulder, Cess shuddered and buried herself closer to Harry’s robes with a small whimper, her battle-lust temporarily overridden by pure fear.’

‘A ritualised storm of power,’ Meciél said grimly. ‘At least twenty or so casters and probably guided by Voldemort, as he seems quite adept at utilising the darker powers of others for his own gains. I can tell you this- The Denarians are here for sure.’

“How many?” Harry snorted sourly, still watching the battle below him. Although the confrontation of power had done severe damage to both armies- Harry saw that many of the distant figures had been vaporised- the fighting continued, nevertheless, it was slowly dying down as the last of the defenders were forced back into their ruined keep.

‘All of them,’ Meciél answered. ‘I can sense them. They are all very close, although I suspect that most of them are participants of the ritual right now. We should move quickly, complete what task it is the sword wishes us to complete, and leave.’

“I agree,” Harry said. Adrenaline and Hellfire were pumping into his veins, producing an effect that left his entire body tingling and wanting more. He rested his left hand on the sheathed sword on his back and prodded Cess on his shoulder with his wand. “Cess!”

Cess shook her head and buzzed off Harry’s shoulder, her mood quickly returning now that the epic clash of power had vanished.

“This way, this way!” She chattered quickly and buzzed off down the edge of the small hill, her silver glow disappearing into the darkened snowy trees.

Harry gripped his wand, casting an idle glance back at the dead hellhound and wondering if there were anymore nearby. He quickly broke into a run and began to follow Cess through the dense and dark forest.

It took Harry twenty minutes to duck, weave and crawl through the dense vegetation of the icy forest, avoiding the icicles protruding from the ground and killing another Hellhound that had tried to attack him. The sounds of battle clashed against the howling winds, a distant noise that only grew louder and louder as Cess led him through the harsh wilderness and towards the besieged fortress.

She eventually stopped at a small hole, which looked as if it had been made by the Nevernever equivalent of rabbits. Nonetheless, it was wide enough for Harry to drop down. Screams of agony and shouts of triumph roared from the hole as he peered down it, seeing nothing but darkness.

“Down here,” Cess said, gesturing with her tiny hand. A malicious grin covered her little face as she raised her toothpick of a sword and licked her lips in anticipation. “I can smell blood. There’s fighting down there! Quickly!”

Harry eyed Cess carefully. As much as the little faery amused him, she was still a faery and entrapment was what they revelled in. Cess noticed his look and gave an impatient sigh, putting her hands on her small hips and buzzing in front of his face.

“I promise thrice that it’s safe,” she said, wings fluttering behind her. She zoomed to Harry’s head, making the Denarian wince when she grabbed onto his hair and braced herself. “Now let’s go!”

Harry sighed and took a deep breath, peering down the hole. Both Meciél and the sword gave him a mental nudge as he teetered over the edge, before he clasped his wand against his chest and dropped down into the hole.

Everything went dark as Harry fell, his back scraping against the sides of the hole. Bits of roots and dirt whipped at his face, the painful stings overwhelmed by the adrenaline and thrill of the fall. The tunnel levelled out and suddenly Harry was sliding down it, wincing as he bumped over rocks. He was distantly aware of Cess clutching his hair, hollering something in her light and squeaky voice, and a wide grinned spread across his face.

“Lumos!” Harry muttered and the tip of his wand glowed with a brilliant light, removing the shroud of darkness around him just in time to see a small rocky ridge that was growing larger and larger.

Without a second thought, Harry channelled Hellfire into the lumos, causing the light to go a dim red, and hurled it at the obstruction.

There was a flash of light and the tunnel rumbled with fire. Harry swivelled his head as he slid past the fiery debris of the rocks, heated embers and sparks sizzling into his skin and robes.

When he looked up again, a bright light was growing closer and closer and a second later he was thrown out of the end of the tunnel. He stumbled, his feet touching bare ground and struggling to keep him balanced as he involuntarily took giant running strides forward-right into the massive form of an axe-wielding centaur.

For a moment it was hard to tell who was more surprised; the centaur or Harry.

It was like hitting a brick wall and Harry groaned, stumbling back and shaking his head. He was somewhere near the broken gates, with hundreds of creatures clashing on either side. There was a cascade of noise all around, thousands upon thousands of different sounds making one giant and undecipherable clamour. The centaur, far stockier than anything the Forbidden Forest could hope to produce, turned its head, its malicious eyes narrowing angrily. It lifted its hefty axe which, like all of the weapons and armour Harry had seen, was made of gleaming black ice, and brought it down upon on Harry.

Harry's wand flew up, a word of magic barked from his lips and there was a flash of light- the axe shattered in a loud tinkling noise, the centaur reared back on its hind legs, looking surprised and Harry pressed forward, his wand whipping out in front of him.

"Extundo!" Harry growled.

A small sparkling orb of midnight-blue magic blasted forward from his wand and into the Centaur's exposed belly. The orb struck the belly and splattered in a wave of dark liquid, oozing into the skin. An instant later, the centaur roared and collapsed as skin darkened and violently tearing itself apart as the liquid exploded within the creature itself.

Harry felt a flare of grim satisfaction for only an instant before Meciél seized control of his neck muscles and jerked his head back, just as a thin white-feathered arrow whizzed by. Small goblins, clad in armour

and ugly, vicious smiles, shot arrow after arrow at Harry, who raised his wand and conjured a defensive shield of fiery hues that surrounded him. Arrows pinged off the shield, their heads snapping in showers of blue electric-like sparks.

“Terramotus!” Harry growled, clasp ing his wand in both hands and bringing it down in the direction of the goblins as if it were a great hammer.

Brown sparks fell to the ground, which shuddered as a giant crack tore through the bloodied and icy ground. The goblins gave yelps of surprise, flinging themselves to the sides as the crack tore through their position. Harry paid them no heed, although he heard a grunt of pain from a Goblin that had been flung into the crumbling remains of a wall, instead he had turned to counter yet another attack.

His eyes widened with surprise at the sight of a Red Court vampire, its leathery skin and bat-like wings absolutely soaked with blood. It hissed at him and pounced, soaring over a pack of large wolf-like creatures mauling each other, black shadows gathering in its hands.

“Navictus!” Harry barked A bright bolt of azure magic, crackling with little bolts of electric-like energy, zapped from his wand and struck the vampire, throwing it aside. It whined as it struck the ground, arcs of energy zipping over its body as it thrashed and shuddered uncontrollably.

Another vampire leapt for him, but a streak of white, blue and green dove from the air and grabbed it mid-flight. Harry caught a glimpse of an incredibly busty woman with an avian-like beak and giant wings before it disappeared, throwing the helpless prey to one of its kin. There were loud bird-like shrieks as the creatures toyed with the vampire and a moment later, its carcass dropped to the ground, its throat torn out and its body mangled

“For the Lady!” Somebody shouted, a melodious and silken voice rising above the din of battle.

Harry, his body tense and his mind blazing with searing hot Hellfire, watched as a High Sidhe rallied Maeve’s loyal forces to his side, his

human-like features remote and his bright green eyes feral. Three large trolls, with bulging muscles and giant swords of ice, lumbered forward and smashed into the incoming invaders. Smaller creatures, goblins and dwarves and the like, were carelessly thrown away, their bodies broken and unmoving. One of the centaurs screamed as the troll sliced it in two, a shower of dark blood spraying against the last patch of unmarred snow.

On the other side of the broken gate, four more Sidhe called shouted out orders and the invaders rallied against the loyalist assault. Red Court Vampires gathered in a huddle, their human skins cracking and revealing the leathery beast within as they hurled pools of shadows at one of the trolls. The darkness surrounded the troll and it roared in agony, swiping its sword and killing friend and foe alike as the black power began to eat through its very flesh. A moment later, it collapsed in a heap, squashing two goblins, and shuddered once before dying.

The Sidhe from both ends were attacking each other, pools of potent Fae magic blasting through the air with loud crackles. Emerald bolts of lightning met orbs of frost; the ground shuddered under the strain and light danced through the air, rivalling most fireworks in terms of sheer beauty.

In the middle of this melee of war and death stood Harry, his mind a blur with Hellfire and his wand flicking repeatedly as he fell back into the honed instincts of battle. Maeve's loyal soldiers, apparently recognising that he was on their side, made room for him as they advanced. Harry reflexively ducked a searing bolt of power, ignoring the way his hair stood up on end as it flew past him and struck the goblin behind him.

"Corium Ustulo!" Harry hissed angrily, rising up and brandishing his wand at the nearest enemy.

A harpy, one of the avian women with claws and a beak, shrieked and yowled as her skin blackened in a series of burns. She fell to the ground, her pitiful cries of pain ending when a black unicorn galloped forward and trampled over her, snorting madly and letting out a deafening neigh. There was power behind that sound and it struck at

Harry's mind full-force. He grimaced, his wand wavering slightly, while around him goblins and large fire-breathing dogs whimpered and screamed.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry bellowed angrily, his voice drowned out amongst all of the fighting around him. A flash of green light and a roaring sound of wind filled the air and the unicorn collapsed mid-gallop, the gleaming light fading from its eyes. Harry turned his wand to the other end of the line, seeing another unicorn charging at the temporarily weakened defenders, ignoring the four or five arrows embedded in its hide. "Ventosus!"

A swirling wind arose around Harry, lashing out and gathering the fallen swords, spears and arrows that littered the ground around their dead wielders. Harry thrust his wand towards the other unicorn, only turning to deflect a thrown spear of jagged ice. The weapons flew through the air, one of the swords taking off the head of an unfortunate goblin.

The gale and accompaniments slammed into the black unicorn just as it charged through the defensive line, just as it impaled a shrieking green-skinned female onto its horn. The giant beast was knocked to its side and bellowed in anger as the weapons slashed and slammed into it. It collapsed and buckled as one of the scimitars dug deep into its hind legs. A moment later, it was promptly swarmed by a horde of murderous goblins, which thrust their swords and spears into its exposed flesh with murderous expressions on their faces.

The ground rumbled, a large tear ripping right through the middle of the battlefield, and Harry jumped back as a large wall of glittering water arose from the hole. The entire battle stilled for a single moment as the water paused, suspended by the powerful forces that gripped it, before it loomed over Maeve's soldiers and crashed down on them. Harry grimaced, his arms straining as he held his wand aloft, parting the water that came towards him through sheer power. One of the Sidhe closest to him conjured a powerful protection charm around him, a solid dome of blue light. The water struck it and he gave a yell of surprise as he was lifted off his feet, shield and all, along with the rest of his troops. A female Sidhe, a beautiful redhead with oval purple eyes, pushed forward a mist that surrounded a small portion of

the army before her. When the water struck this mist, it solidified and dropped to the ground as ice. Although a few of the larger creatures, like the two trolls, could bear the brunt of the spell, most were washed away, leaving the defensive line scattered and broken.

"Well, this isn't good," Harry muttered to himself as his eyes flicked to his left and right. He, along with a few goblins, two trolls and the Sidhe Lady, were the only ones left standing before the invading host. He sidled up towards the remains of the army and gave the Lady a half-hearted wave when she glanced down at him.

"You are the Denarian Meciél, yes?" She asked quickly, picking at a small clump of oozing gore at her shoulder. She winced at her wound, pain flashing over her lovely face.

Her voice was soft and melodious and for a moment Harry felt her trying to push a glamour at him, to make him feel things that weren't true. He threw it away easily, his mind defended by Hellfire and Meciél combined.

"Yes," Harry answered shortly, meeting her widening eyes and her grudging respect with a short nod. He glanced at the invading army, which were clustering around two Sidhe Lords, silver-haired and haughty on their horses. "I think you're in a bit of trouble here."

"We need to take out those Lords," the female said sharply. She lifted a sabre of frost and brandished it towards the enemy. Harry felt rather than heard the rush of power that lanced from her sword and watched as the front rank of goblins was cut a swath, invisible power gouging past their armour and cleaving off limbs in a spray of blood.

"Charge!" shouted one of the Lords, his hand aloft in the air.

The world moved as the various creatures of the enemy, including vampires, goblins, centaurs and other beings Harry had never seen before, rushed for the small defensive picket with a bellowing cry of defiance and hatred. At the same time, the Lords threw blasts of power at them, sparkling orbs of light that crackled with raw faerie magic. The Sidhe Lady countered one, a rush of green light and sparks fluttered through the air as a Satyr was thrown aside by its

hind-legs by the aftershock. Harry countered the other, gathering a pool of fiendfyre into his hand and hurling it forward. It struck the faerie magic and the world went white with a thunderous detonation. Cursed flame jutted to the side, raging uncontrollably as it licked against the fallen corpses, eating through flesh and armour alike.

“Wait!” the Lady barked sharply and the goblins and Trolls around her paused, falling back into their ranks.

Her purple eyes gleamed as the enemy charged, surging through the shallow water-filled ravine that the Sidhe Lord had created. Some of them made it across but several were yanked down into the water with surprised yelps, quick darting figures pulling them through the water with surprising strength. Harry caught a glimpse of a beautiful female face before the water darkened with blood. At the same time, harpies screeched loudly in the air and zoomed down, picking up goblins, satyr and even a centaur and dragging them up to the sky. A fine mist of blood sprayed down as the harpies devoured them, greedily digging into warm flesh.

“Now!” The Lady ordered and brandished her sword.

The goblins in the front screamed angrily and charged, several a few paces behind as they shot arrows into the enemy ranks. The two trolls lumbered forward, swinging their giant cleavers into the disorientated ranks, their glowing eyes alight with bloodlust. At the same time, Cess appeared with at least two dozen of her own kind, her silver glow reflected by the ranks behind her. They charged for one of the Sidhes, who cocked his hand. A yellow streak of light filled the air, slicing through the small Fae. Harry’s eyes widened as his view of Cess disappeared underneath the yellow light and he growled. His rage and fury sizzled his very veins and adrenaline pumped through his system.

“Carnifico!”he snarled. An arc of glimmering silver light lanced forward, was deflected by one of the Sidhe and struck a centaur in the chest. The spell spun around the centaur wildly, vines of silver light whipping out into the air as it circled and rose past the creature’s chest until it reached its neck. Four of the ‘vines’ suddenly straightened the silver

light sliced straight through the centaurs neck, instantly decapitating him. "Talus Tabidus!"

A billowing cloud of dirty grey smoke poured out onto the battlefield, spiralling in towards several of the enemy creatures. Three goblins and a large looming plant-like creature inhaled it in and gagged, their bodies trembling as the smoke forced its way down their vastly different throats. The plant-like creature shook it off after a moment, not affected by the potent spell, and it struck at two of Maeve's goblins with its tentacles. But the goblins collapsed with screams, the inhaled smoke wrapping around their skeleton and their bones beginning to liquefy.

Harry's next spell lashed out against one of the Sidhe Lords and its horse neighed in panic, even though its master had blocked the curse. It reared up on its hind legs and Harry caught a glimpse of silver light as Cess and a few of her surviving compatriots charged at the Sidhe Lord, darting around his head and plunging their swords into his eyes. He screamed and went down, stomped on by one of his own trolls as it charged forward, moving with the speed and force of a stampeding elephant.

The ground rumbled as Harry took a step forward, his eyes glittering with dark power and his wand glittering with a crimson glow.

"Evertoxuro!" Harry muttered. A jet of searing flame sprayed from the tip of his wand, clouds of oily smoke rising into the air, and the fire licked at the trolls exposed flesh.

The troll roared in defiance, halting its advance and pulling up a shield covered in icicles- something that was almost as big as Harry was. With a grunt of satisfaction, it slowly advanced, hiding its face behind its shield.

"Argentum Telum!" Harry snapped, and silver light formed at the tip of his wand, streaking forward in a shape vaguely resembling an arrow.

It struck the shield, shattering through the icicles and the troll roared in agony as the spell cracked his armour. Its shield useless, the troll

raised its cleaver- just as Harry brandished his wand at its cracked armour.

“Frendo!” Harry roared and a flash of purple light blasted from the tip of his wand, the devastation curse so powerful that nearby debris visibly shuddered.

An eerie screeching noise, almost three times as bad as somebody dragging their nails down blackboard, and the streak of potent dark magic had slammed into the troll. There was a blinding flash and a shuddering boom as the spell struck the weakened section of the armour and half of the troll disappeared under the light.

Harry was panting when Cess buzzed back up to him, dark magic surging through his veins and bringing on a light-headed feeling that he thoroughly enjoyed. Nearby, the fighting continued as the Sidhe Lady and opposing Sidhe Lord started battling, but the area around Harry was remarkably peaceful- the enemy already learning to avoid him.

“Harry!” Cess squealed and he blinked when she darted into his hair, nestling affectionately against the dark strands. “Isn’t this fun?”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a grin. She was right, all of the frustration, tension and anger that had been building up within him had been burned away and used to kill the enemy attacking Maeve.

At that thought, something buzzed on his back and Harry twitched in surprise. He scowled; he had almost forgotten about the Sword of the Cross but now it tugged at him, dragging him in the other direction. Perhaps it was affecting Cess too or perhaps she had suddenly remembered her mission.

“We need to go that way!” Cess said and Harry saw her tiny leg gesture in the same direction as the sword from the corner of his eye.

“Alright,” Harry muttered grumpily.

As he turned to leave, a loud horn blared and High Sidhe on horseback, accompanied by centaurs and unicorns, charged from

beyond the gates and into the fray as more and more invaders started to pile up against the broken remains of the walls. Harry sighed and looked away as he slowly made his way towards the fortress.

The inside of the giant ice fortress was as beautiful as it was deadly. Dark ice of a multitude of purple, black and green hues hung from the ceiling and walls in a series of sharp icicles. The icy floor glittered under the light of the torches that hung from the walls, which Harry noticed gave off coldness rather than heat. Every few metres, he saw signs of recent battle- patches of blackened ice and puddles of slowly freezing dark liquid. As Harry navigated his way through Maeve's icy stronghold, a scent began to flicker at the end of his nose. Cess had disappeared a few minutes ago, so he had no idea where the hell he was meant to be going.

'Sulphur,' Meciél murmured. 'The Denarians are here.'

"I hope Vesper's around," Harry said darkly, cocking his head and pausing at the end of the hallway. He could hear distant sounds of battle coming down from the right. He gripped his wand and followed the noises. "Because somebody needs a raping for all of this."

'Do not underestimate her strength,' Meciél warned. 'That said, you have the skills and powers to destroy her. Do so if you can.'

"I plan on it," Harry muttered as he approached a small set of doors. He could hear a steady clanking noise beyond them.

Suddenly there was a deafening bang and a wordless cry of inhuman rage, the voice clearly feminine, and blue light spilled from the door, the entire hallways shuddering. It was over in a few seconds and once again the clanking noises started up again.

"Well, there's no time like the present," Harry said, raising his wand. "Frendo!"

The door buckled and shattered into a cloud of deadly ice shrapnel underneath the force of the sapphire flash of light that blasted from Harry's wand. Harry stepped through the remains, his body throbbing

with adrenaline and Hellfire. His eyes took in the scene before him even as he raised his wand at the nearest target.

Maeve, the Winter Lady herself, stood in the middle of a giant hall that once might have been called eerily beautiful were it not for the faerie corpses littering the ground and giant cracks that ripped through the fragile ice walls and floor. Her green eyes, so similar yet so fundamentally different from Harry's, were narrowed in spiteful rage and her shimmering hair was hidden underneath a black, icy helmet, which went with the suit of armour that she had donned. Standing next to her was a smaller girl, a child, with Maeve's looks.

Walking towards her at a steady and unyielding pace was something Harry had never seen before. Twice as large as Harry, they looked to be giant suits of armour, made from the bane of Faerie magic, iron and steel. They all carried giant hammers, which also looked to be made from iron. Even now, Maeve raised her hands and blue light spilled into them. She hurled it at the nearest iron hulk and the ground rumbled, debris and ice cracking underneath the very force of the blow. But the behemoth withstood the blast, the iron negating Maeve's spell, and he continued to lumber forward. Harry couldn't tell if the thing was a mechanical or a magical construct of some kind, or if there was something behind all the steel.

"Verbera!" He bellowed loudly and Hellfire flashed through his veins, amplifying the power of the curse and turning it into a spell that cracked bones into a spell that cracked steel. The air rippled with an unseen force and the curse lashed out against the iron figure in a series of blows. Steel groaned and ruptured, little cracks appearing on the iron hulk's armour and the titan reeled as large dents were slammed into its armour.

"Argentum Telum!" Harry finished it up with a growl. A flash of silver light, looking almost like a hazy arrowhead, blasted forward with impeccable aim and punctured through the largest dent in the thick steel armour. The steel gave way as the powerful piercing spell slammed into the hulk's innards and it collapsed to the ground in a heap of metallic limbs, a loud crashing noise filling the air.

“Definitely somebody inside it then,” Harry muttered, casting a quick eye over the rest of the hall. Satisfied that there was nothing else still alive, he turned to Maeve and gave her a brilliant smile. “Hi Maeve,” he uttered with a small wave, both looking and feeling smug.

“Harry,” Maeve greeted seductively, her eyes raking up and down his form. She didn’t sound at all surprised to see him. “I’m glad to see that my faithful servant was able to acquire your services so quickly” She came closer to him until her breath was brushing against his ear, her next words a husky whisper. “Let me repay your help with a kiss...”

“Oh, no,” chuckled Harry, taking a step backwards and folding his arms. “I’m not that stupid, Maeve. You’re going to owe me after this.”

Maeve leaned back and an ugly and utterly inhuman expression flickered across her face, her soulless eyes narrowing in annoyance. Harry shrugged off the look easily. For Maeve to harm him now would be contrary to everything the Fae believed about debt and obligation—something that they could not even conceive of defying.

‘They are strange creatures,’ Meciél mused.

“I hear you, Fallen,” Maeve said sharply, although she looked more amused than anything. Her voice took on a seductive purr and her lips turned upwards. “This is my domain, my place of power. I see and hear all.”

“Then how’d you miss the giant army tearing down your walls?” Harry asked wryly.

“Betrayal,” was all Maeve said, something dark flashing behind her eyes. Her pale fingers flexed threateningly. “I have dealt with it already.”

“I’m sure,” Harry remarked dryly. He glanced down at the little girl by his side and frowned. “Now why don’t you and your little sister follow me before you get turned into Faerie slurries and I get turned into a Denarian hotdog?”

“Sister?” Maeve repeated slowly and gave a soft tinkling laugh. She shook her head, her glacial-coloured dreadlocks falling from her armoured helmet. “I see how you would think so- we do have a startling resemblance.”

She reached down and idly stroked the girl's face with the back of her hand. The girl remained as still as stone, merely gazing up at Harry with expressionless eyes. Within his mind, Meciél let out a choked gasp of dawning comprehension.

“No, little Harry, this is not my sister,” Maeve said softly, a victorious and knowing smile curving her lips. “This is my daughter- well, your daughter. Daughter, I want you to meet your father.”

The room suddenly fell into a deep silence as Harry stopped, his mouth closing slowly. The sounds of battle from outside were growing louder and louder by the second, but Harry ignored them as he stared down at the little girl with nothing less than pure shock. He had to admit, there was some resemblance between them. The green eyes, which Harry had attributed to Maeve, were more like his own than the soulless fey. She was about seven or eight, with long dark hair and pale skin- Harry doubted she got to see much sun around here. The girl stared back at him emotionlessly, assessing him even as he assessed her.

“Um...what?” Harry uttered after a moment. He frowned and gazed at Maeve accusingly. “Hang on, even if I got you pregnant, shouldn't she be a little...smaller?”

“Time is relative here,” Maeve answered slyly. “You know that.”

“Huh,” Harry uttered again, his brows furrowed as if he were in deep thought. The ground shuddered as something loud smashed through one of the doors, an iron clanking noise filling the air. Harry didn't even look up as he raised his wand. “Avada Kedavra!”

The green streak of light sailed from his wand and he heard a furious explosion as it turned the iron hulk into a twisted heap of metal alight with burning green flames. Maeve glanced at Harry with something

like surprise and grudging respect. She idly stroked her-Harry's-daughter on the head.

"Er...does she speak at all?" Harry asked after a moment. "Or is just practising her 'children of the corn' routine?"

"Hello father," the girl said tonelessly.

"Okay," Harry said slowly. "That's not creepy at all." He frowned and scratched his head, glancing between Maeve and the girl with a strange expression. "We should...probably go now. Somebody's huffing, puffing and blowing the fuck out of your walls."

"I agree," Maeve said softly and straightened. "Come, daughter. Your father will take us to safety."

Harry twitched.

A/N: The response I got for the last chapter was- well, lots and lots of people reviewed, so I'm all happy. Thanks for all the people at DLP, especially all-powerful-oz for pointing out my spelling, grammar and 'tired-as-hell' errors I made. This part was going to be part of Ch21 but it was getting too long, so I split it down into two. Here's Ch22 for you folks. I hope you enjoy.

Harry had been right. The last of the defending army was in the process of being destroyed, the Lady Sidhe that had been commanding them was surrounded by a dozen black-skinned vampires and bleeding profusely. As Harry led Maeve and the girl out of the fortress and into the decimated and corpse-filled courtyard, he raised his wand.

“Evertoxuro!” He barked, a searing jet of flames blowing out from the tip of his wand and lancing across the icy ground.

Two of the vampires screeched in agony as they were consumed and the rest turned their attention away from the redhead Fae for the split second she needed. With a bellow of fury, she stamped her foot on the ground. Faerie magic hissed and crackled around her as the earth shuddered, a rolling wave of ice, snow and dirt erupted from around her and throwing the other vampires off of their feet. She grabbed her sword, a giant two-handed blade of polished ice, dulled with nicks and stained with blood, and slammed it down on the first vampire's head.

“Cruento Adustum!” Harry hissed as the Fae sliced the head off a second, noticing that more and more enemies were pouring into the courtyard.

His wand glittered with dark hues and around him the blood of the fallen corpses hissed and spluttered, rising into the air as a series of dim crimson balls of glowing fire, which writhed and twisted as if straining to break free. With a wave of his wand, Harry threw the ten or so balls of bloodfire through the air, striking the seven or eight vampires and tearing straight through their bodies.

As they screamed in agony, their twisted and deformed bodies beginning to burn with unnatural flames, Maeve raised her hands, her face twisted up into a contemptuous scowl as she glared furiously at a large centaur galloping towards her. She made an odd motion with her hands and suddenly the centaur stumbled, rising up into the air and flailing about uselessly. Maeve extended her hands together, a gleeful smile on her face, and the centaur was torn into two and carelessly thrown away. Maeve made another gesture and suddenly a fork of lightning blasted down from the sky, a deafening boom of thunder following it an instant later. It struck one of the traitorous Sidhe off his horse and the Fae literally exploded in a cocoon of light, the ground cracking underneath the force of the blow as flesh and armour were disintegrated.

Harry watched with narrowed eyes, Hellfire rushing through his body, sustaining him where a normal mortal human would stumble. He frowned, even as Maeve raised her arm and produced a long, sharp and wicked-looking spear of ice in her open palm. Past the thick scent of sulphur, there was something else- more sulphur, so different yet so similar to his own.

'Denarian!' Meciél hissed, and she moved Harry's body faster than he would have been able to, throwing him to the side as a searing arc of fire sliced into the ground where he had been standing, melting ice and gouging frost.

Harry spun around and suddenly the sword of the cross was in his hands, blazing a powerful silver flame that made the other Denarian momentarily recoil. Harry saw thick eyebrows and a large crooked nose before the other man transformed. Limbs thickened, and stretched. His face drew in, whiskers sprouted from his moustache, and a row of razor-sharp teeth burst from the man's gums. One moment he was a man, the next he was a tiger- or something similar to it- with two sets of eyes, one normal and the other glowing, and a crimson sigil glowing on its forehead.

The creature pounced, its paws extended and a glowing set of blue eyes glaring hatefully at Harry. Harry raised the sword, there was a flash of silver light and suddenly the creature was down, whimpering

as it backed away from the holy fire. It hissed and snarled at him and suddenly it became a man again, his hands full of dark fire.

“Die!” The man screamed and hurled it at Harry. Harry swung his sword at the flame and batted it away, silvery wisps overtaking the hellfire and rendering it inert.

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry muttered, his left hand clasping his wand as he used his right hand to slash the sword at the other man, who gracefully ducked.

The green streak of light exploded from the tip of his wand, gouging the ground in an arc of light and narrowly missing the man, striking a large feather-covered Fae woman behind him. She collapsed as the man muttered something in a harsh, guttural tongue, flexing his fingers at Harry.

A sudden blinding stabbing sensation struck him in the chest and Harry grunted, his face screwed up in pain. The man grinned victoriously, squeezing his hand shut. Suddenly he grunted, his eyes widening with shock as two large ashen wings of bone exploded from Harry’s back, impaling him on the chest. His eyes glinting with anger and animalistic rage, Harry lifted the Denarian up and hurled him aside, his body bouncing along the ground until he came to an awkward stop, his limbs twisted and shattered. The courtyard was suddenly full of enemies, dozens of different Fae creatures and vampires rushing for them. Behind them lumbered two large iron hulks, giant cleavers clasped in their metallic hands.

Harry surged forward, his blood pumping furiously in his veins as he hefted up his sword and brought it down over his head, slamming it down onto a goblins helmet and crushing the small creature’s skull with a flash of silver fire. At the same time, he brought his wand up, a cone of flame lancing from the tip and exploding in a roaring maelstrom of fire, consuming a large black-furred unicorn. He was distantly aware of Maeve spreading out her hands, the very air around her warping with power as an invisible force lashed out, striking anybody who dared to approach her, crushing bones and tearing flesh before carelessly hurling them aside. Even the small girl was fighting, a pool of green and red light glowing in her hand as she

threw bolts of magic at the invaders, gouging deep holes into their flesh or armour.

Soon, Harry was engrossed in his own fighting, barely noticing as the red-haired Sidhe fell back into the fortress. He blocked a gleaming icicle being wielded by a large goat-legged creature with the sword in his left hand, using his right to slam down his wand on the exposed arm. There was a crack that was barely audible over the screams of battle and the creature roared in agony, its arm reduced to a bloody pulp. An instant later the wand slapped at its face and it fell as its head disappeared underneath a flash of intense purple light. Less than a second later, Harry whirled around, his sword flicking through the air in a silver blur and slicing into a rearing centaur, digging deep past armour into flesh. Warm, sticky blood splattered across his chest as the Centaur collapsed, ruining his already-mucky Hogwarts robes.

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry hissed coldly, battle-lust almost consuming his mind. He could feel the sword in his hand protesting at the dark magic that surged through his veins and distantly felt a heat spreading through his leather glove, but he ignored it. “Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!”

Three streaks of deathly green light soared forward into the mass, striking random targets and killing them instantly. An ogre, a giant and ugly creature with rotting bluish skin and beady red eyes, growled as it stepped on its dead ally without care, raising its club and bringing it down on Harry. Harry whipped his wand, sending a glimmer of crimson light that blasted the club out of the ogre’s hands. The ogre only had a moment to look surprised before four balls of light surrounded it, spinning around its large body and rising until they circled its neck. An instant later, the balls suddenly shot off in opposite directions, slicing through bone and flesh and decapitating the ogre. Harry literally hurled his sword at an approaching hobgoblin, a short, squat cousin of the normal goblin, and levitated the body of the ogre, using a blast of power to send the heavy corpse right into the mob of attackers, sending them tumbling.

A loud horn blew across the courtyard and Harry diverted his attention for a split second, a vicious grin crossing his face as he saw the red-haired Sidhe leading a small army of wounded and bloodied

defenders, her purple eyes glowing with furious anger. The two armies clashed with a mixture of defiant cries and pained screams. There was no order to this fight- it was nothing like it had been before. Both sides were meshed together, often fighting back-to-back with their enemies as they hacked and slashed at each other with their weapons of black ice. The more magically powerful of the combatants hurled blasts of power into the mob, apathetic if they killed friend or foe, until them too were pressed into melee combat against the enemy, often being the quickest to fall.

Harry saw allies accidentally cutting each other down more than once as he tore through the chaotic battlefield, his powerful magic and potent sword cutting through swathes of creatures with ease. Meciél blended in with his consciousness, her blazing presence meeting his quick temperament, until they were almost as one mind. Together, his reflexes were heightened to the point of precognition, Meciél analysing sounds and hearing swords swishing through the air in a heartbeat and Harry subconsciously rising to meet them, his sword usually blocking the blow and his wand delivering a fast and often lethal curse in return. It was not hard to see why Meciél had once been a ruler of the Denarians, her natural powers amplifying her hosts power and skills far beyond most of her kin. For Harry, it was one of the most exhilarating things he had ever felt before in his life. It was the rush of close-counter fighting, the knowledge that if he were a second too slow then he would be killed.

Somehow, over the course of the next few minutes, he wound up approaching Maeve as she struggled to defeat one of the giant iron hulks, her spells crashing against its armour uselessly. Powerful blasts of Fae magic, spells that Harry would have had no chance in deflecting, let alone surviving, crashed against thick steel, making the iron hulk stagger backwards under the force of the blow but doing little else. Maeve's lip curled up, power flashed through her veins and she made a gesture with her hands. Something rumbled and suddenly a large crack ripped through the ice, surrounding the hulk. The ground fell away before its feet and it disappeared in the dark, jagged hole.

“As-Extundo!-fun as this is,” Harry shouted to Maeve over the din, absently felling a large troll, his spell tearing its head halfway off its shoulders. “We should get going. You’re not going to win this.”

Maeve’s eyes glittered but she nodded, gesturing for her daughter to follow her as Harry led the three of them away from the battle. Maeve raised her hands and suddenly the sky darkened, a white mist seeping into the courtyard and obscuring everything from view. There were shouts and screams, the armies of both sides swinging their weapons through the thick mist, blindly trying to strike out at something beyond their sight and usually felling one of their own for their efforts.

“Nice,” Harry admitted grudgingly.

“I try,” Maeve said with a satisfied smile, wiping her blood-stained hands on her armour. She glanced down at her daughter, who was standing obediently by her side. “It’s vital to give your children a good example to follow.”

“One fucked-up Winter Lady’s more than enough,” Harry said cheerfully, brushing aside one of the branches as he led them to the edge of the forest. Displeasure flickered over Maeve’s face as she followed him in, while the child watched on curiously.

It took them nearly twenty minutes to reach the site where Harry had entered the Nevernever. Once they were there, Harry paused for a breath. The woods were quiet, a soft wind blowing snow down on them. If it weren’t for the fact that he was covered in blood, none of it his, he could have easily attributed the last hour or so as part of a dream. It had certainly felt like it.

“Okay, off to Hogwarts,” Harry declared cheerfully, jumping up.

“Hogwarts?” Maeve asked and shook her head derisively. “I think not. I have a safe place that will be useful for the time being. I do thank you though, Harry.”

“No,” Harry said, his smile never leaving his face. Maeve gazed at him unblinkingly. “If you leave now, I don’t get my reward. Besides,

that's my brat right there. I'm claiming the parental right of telling her what the fuck to do."

"You can't do that," Maeve interrupted. She smiled callously. "This is my payment for helping you, remember?"

"Oh, now I remember," Harry responded sarcastically and snorted. "Don't be an idiot, Maeve. Somebody just blew the crap out of your fortress, your 'place of power'. Your own Court can't be trusted anymore. Neither can your safe places."

"I see," Maeve said coldly and Harry noticed her stance changing subtly, now regarding him with annoyance.

"I didn't come all this way for you to get killed," Harry said firmly, narrowing his eyes at her. "I also didn't come all this way for you to not reward me for my help."

"Very well," Maeve said abruptly after a moments pause, stopping briefly to glance up at the sky.

She waved her hand and Harry blinked as a portal appeared seamlessly against the tree line, far more naturally and easily than Harry could make one. Without another word, she walked through, the child following by her side.

"That was too easy," he muttered and paused, his heightened senses picking up the sound of breathing from behind him.

He spun around, absently brushing the snow out of his face, and his eyes widened as Vesper emerged from the trees. Her lithe form was covered by her sheer gown, looking like she was attending some high-class function rather than a battle, but her yellow eyes glowed with an unholy light.

"Maeve, you bitch!" Harry growled, his wand whipping up. "A little warning...Frendo!"

A massive blast of dark magic erupted from his wand in the form of a flash of sapphire light, lashing out at Vesper. Vesper extended her

hands, her eyes never leaving Harry's, and shrugged the curse off, sending it spiralling into one of the trees. There was a concussive boom and snow sprayed up into the air as half of the tree trunk was torn asunder.

Vesper responded with a lance of power, her hands glowing with a sickly yellow light. The air rippled as the spell traversed the distance between them almost instantly, but Harry swung the sword to intercept it, moving just in time to block it. The ground shuddered and cracked under the pressure of the spell as silver light flared up into painfully bright proportions. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and he heard Vesper hissing in pain. His grip loosened for just a second and suddenly the sword was gone, flung out of his hand by the very force of the blow.

"Exturbo Arduro!" Harry snapped, rage and Hellfire fuelling the spell into a deadly blast of flame. Vesper diverted it with her bare hands, melting snow and scorching muddied dirt, but hissed in agony as Harry heard her blackened flesh sizzle

"How do you like that, you stupid bitch!" Harry sneered, his wand flicking through the air as he propelled a streak of deathly green light at her. Vesper fell back, side-stepping the killing curse, which sliced through the tree behind her in an explosion of eerie green flames and the rushing sound of an invisible wind.

Vesper opened her mouth and her eyes flashed yellow, even as she batted away a silver effodio. What emerged from her throat was nothing less than pure noise, a roaring din that shattered ice into powder and made trees shudder and quake in their roots. Harry gave a cry of pain- or he thought he did, he couldn't hear anything except that loud piercing scream that battered at his mind. It was a whirling source of power, threatening to rip apart his mind and tumble both Meciél and him into the abyss of madness.

With great strain, Harry and Meciél tore themselves away from the spell, and abruptly it stopped. Harry was flung aside by the backlash and slammed into a tree, wincing as white-hot pain flared at the back of his head. He glanced up, fury in his emerald eyes and a snarl on

his lip, and saw that Vesper was holding her head- the strain of her own spell too much for even her to shrug off.

“Navictus!” He snarled.

A crackling bolt of azure energy blasted forward, slamming into Vesper as she partially shielded herself. She dispelled the majority of the blast but shrieked as she was thrown aside, landing heavily on the ground. An instant later, she was back on her feet, her yellow eyes glaring hatefully at Harry even as sickly splotches of green and brown started to appear on her beautiful form.

“I have been waiting for this for a very long time, Meciel,” Vesper hissed as the two circled each other, Hellfire thrumming in both of their veins. “Soon you will feel what you have done to me, ten times fold. I will make you suffer...”

“Pungo Plerusque!” Harry snarled and Vesper immediately sidestepped, defensive magics sparkling in her hand. But Harry hadn’t been aiming for her; rather, he had aimed it directly at the Denarian sneaking up from behind him.

The Denarian groaned as he was flung aside, his maddened eyes and frothing mouth indicating that he belonged to one of the lower echelons of the Order of the Blackened Denarius. A second later, he was screaming as his body exploded in a burst of different diseases. Boils and rashes spread across his skin and blood leaked from every orifice, his eyes crimson as the vessels exploded. With foam frothing at his mouth- more so than usual- the man collapsed, failing and shaking in an agonising seizure.

“Let me guess?” Harry said dryly, idly kicking the fallen man in his ribs as even Vesper recoiled at the sight- more so over her past affliction rather than fear. “You’ll make me suffer through something like this?”

Vesper paused, meeting Harry’s arrogant grin, and suddenly she moved as a blur, a series of pulsing orbs of energy spiralling through the air as she sent a barrage of them at him. Harry instinctively went to apparate, but stopped, knowing full-well that it was almost

impossible to succeed whilst in the Nevernever- it being an alternate realm. Instead, he raised his wand and focussed on a tree on the other side of the still-open portal.

“Oicca!” He muttered under his breath.

His modified summoning charm, allowing the object to summon him rather than the other way around, worked perfectly and he was lifted off his feet and sent hurling through the air. The orbs struck where he had been standing a second before and exploded in a swirling vortex of energy, dark sleets striking the ground and each other as they reduced snow, dirt and wood into nothingness.

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry shouted as he landed on his feet

Vesper ducked the killing curse, her hands blurring as she hurled a pair of bright yellow beams at him. Harry deflected both with his wand, the wood vibrating madly in his hand. One of the streaks sliced through a tree and kept on going; the other struck the ground and exploded in a shower of sparks. Harry ducked as the tree collapsed, groaning and splintering. He grunted in pain as a large branch slammed into his back, pinning him to the ground. He straightened and whipped his wand, creating a large blaze of fire to engulf the fallen tree. The fire reared up to the sky, swallowing Vesper’s next spell before being snuffed out into a large puff of greasy smoke as Vesper snapped her fingers.

“Argentonis!” Harry growled.

A large blocky cylinder of silver light exploded from his wand, most of it disappearing in a shower of sparks and leaving seven or eight or so gleaming darts of light to rocket forward. Vesper took a step forward, her eyes glittering furiously, and suddenly two large black-feathered wings shot from her back and enveloped her. The silver darts exploded on the wings with a sound akin to shattering glass.

Harry extended his own bony wings and took a step forward. One of his wings sliced down at the blackened fallen tree, cutting a large chunk off, while the other picked it up and hurled it at her with great force. At the same time, he surged forward, his wand spewing out a

jet of flames. Vesper batted the piece of wood away, ducked the flames and rose to meet Harry head on.

Bone slapped against feathers as the two sets of wings stabbed and slashed at each other, while Vesper raised her hand and backslapped Harry across the face. Harry grunted at the force of the blow but barely felt the pain as he cocked his fist and slammed it into Vesper's bony ribs. Vesper hissed, her nails elongating and jabbing for Harry's eyes. She slashed him across the cheek and followed through with a vicious elbow jab to the nose, grabbing his arm and twisting it behind him to the point of agony. Harry's wing swept back and Vesper was hurled aside just before she was set to break his bone.

Vesper bounced across the ground and ice cracked in a loud splintering noise. Vesper was tumbling but her wings spread out and suddenly she was batting them, rising up off the ground as she floated up in the air. She raised a hand and the air hummed as a bright glare of power exploded from her open palm. Harry growled in anger, retracting his wings and throwing a streak of fire at her exposed form. It exploded on an invisible barrier, the air rippling as it negated the fiery mass. A second later Vesper struck.

A bolt of lightning- an actual bolt of lightning- zapped down from her hand in a deafening boom of noise. Harry's eyes widened even as he threw himself to the side, flinching as a searing heat shot across his cheek, and the ground where he had been standing exploded in a geyser of frozen snow and trapped heat. As Harry staggered up, sparks flickered around the blast point and everything compressed, snow, dirt and vestiges of fire all being sucked in. Just as Harry righted himself, the blast point exploded for a second time, this time in a powerful wave of sonic energy.

Pain flared in his ears and the world was suddenly quiet, a loud ringing noise echoing in his skull as he was flung uselessly aside. By chance or design, the fallen sword was also blown aside and both it and Harry were hurled into the still-open portal back to Hogwarts. The world dissolved into a flash of different colours and the last thing he heard was a scream of utter rage before light blinded his eyes.

A moment later, he was tumbling on a wood floor, his ears still ringing as he bounced across the ground and slammed into one of the walls. He groaned, flinching as bright light struck his eyes, and clambered up, his wand clasped in his hand and a powerful curse at the tip of his tongue. He was just in time to see the portal closing in on itself as it disappeared from existence.

“Fuck!” He snarled, rage and Hellfire surging through his body. “I had her. I had her!”

“So it appeared,” somebody said and Harry started in surprise, automatically swinging his wand up. Dark magic flared at the tip, a concussive blaze of power ready to pulverise and disintegrate the newcomer, but Harry paused and the magic died down.

Dumbledore stood before him in magenta robes that could only be classed as some kind of pyjamas. His eyes were hard and humourless behind his glasses and Fawkes perched on his shoulder, her wings spread aloft and her plumage glittering beautifully with light.

“I believe we should talk,” Dumbledore said slowly and glanced to the side. Harry followed his gaze and saw Maeve, her face devoid of any human emotion. “All of us,” Dumbledore finished. His eyes went down to the small girl by Maeve’s side and he frowned.

“Oh,” Harry said, touching the back of his head gingerly even as Meciell began the process of healing the small wounds that littered his body. “Dumbledore, daughter. Daughter, Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore surveyed the girl with an expressionless gaze and heaved a weary sigh.

“So,” Harry said, breaking the silence that filled the room and gathering the sword of the cross to strap it on his back. “Your place or mine?”

A/N: Thanks to DLP for their help.

"...then the lightning struck, I fell through the portal and that was that," Harry concluded some time later. He scowled in annoyance. "I almost had her, too."

"Very interesting," Dumbledore said quietly, leaning back in his chair. "Very interesting indeed."

His office was rather crowded at the moment, Harry and Dumbledore had seated themselves near the desk while Maeve, and the small girl- whose name Harry still didn't know- were standing near Fawkes's perch, the former apparently involved in a glaring contest with the fiery bird. Harry sensed that there was some kind of communication going on between them; mostly because Maeve was growing angrier and angrier the longer she stared into the phoenix's beady dark eyes.

"And you say the sword urged you to go?" Dumbledore mused, stroking his long, white beard with a wrinkled hand. "That is quite interesting. Do you think a higher power wished to keep Maeve alive?"

"Maeve would have been killed," Harry said firmly, his eyes swinging towards the seductive Fae. "When she dies, her power and title goes to the nearest appropriate host. If one of the rebel Winter Sidhe got it, there'd be nothing the rest of the Winter Court could do about it, and Vesper would have a powerful ally by her side."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore murmured slowly. "But the title might not necessarily have gone to one of the rebels." He stared at Harry impassively. "If Maeve had been killed, then I believe the title and the power that came with it would have been bequeathed to your daughter, thus allowing Vesper and her allies to coerce and manipulate her as they wished."

"I doubt anybody could manipulate one of the Faerie queens," Harry said doubtfully.

"A Faerie queen she may become, nevertheless, she would still be a child," Dumbledore said gravely. "Perhaps you were called to save your daughter, rather than her mother."

"Whatever," Harry said with an irritated scowl. "Who gives a crap? It didn't happen. End of story."

"You will find, Harry, that the realm of what-may-have-been beckons strongly when a wizard reaches my age," Dumbledore said and smiled benignly. "One of the many signs of senility, they say."

"Please don't start with that fucking philosophical crap. I'm safe, Maeve is safe, the little bastard child is sa-" Harry was interrupted as his left hand rose up and slapped him across the face, the loud crack of skin meeting skin echoing in the room and gathering everybody's attention.

It was hard to tell who was more surprised, the observers or Harry himself as he gaped at his hand, his eyes wide with surprise as outrage crossed his face.

"What the fuck was that- ow!" Harry gasped, his hand moving back and slapping his cheek again.

'Mind your tongue around your child,' Meciél reprimanded severely.

"What?" Harry asked, rubbing his cheek with his right hand as a pained expression crossed his face. Meciél wasn't numbing his pain.

His left hand rose up again and Harry lashed out with the other, gripping it by the wrist before it could hit him again. He scowled, narrowing his eyes and focussing all of his mental efforts to block Meciél access to his muscles and body.

"Alright," he growled angrily, satisfied that he had reasserted his control on his body. He felt Meciél's satisfaction, then turned and glared at Dumbledore defiantly. "What are you looking at? Haven't you ever seen somebody slap himself in the face before?"

Dumbledore merely smiled, although there was a vaguely concerned expression in his eyes as he gazed at Harry speculatively. Harry ignored it and leaned back in his chair, muttering sourly under his breath.

"You've never minded before," he grumbled. "Bloody hormonal, PMS-ing, mood-swinging, woman."

'I'm sorry Harry. What did you say?' asked Meciél, a sharp edge to her amused tone.

"I said 'Bloody hormonal, PMS-ing, mood-swinging, woman!'" Harry called out loudly, an arrogant expression of irritation on his face. "Come on, you live in my head."

He glanced back at Dumbledore, only to see the old man gazing at Fawkes with an intense look on his face, his blue eyes distant and his features emotionless. After a moment, the Headmaster pulled himself together and smiled.

"It appears Fawkes and Maeve have reached an agreement."

"We should never have come here, Denarian," Maeve said sharply, taking off her icy helm and carelessly throwing it to the ground. She allowed her long glacial-coloured hair to swish down behind her back, her bright green and utterly inhuman eyes glaring at Fawkes with a deep-seated fury. "I do not like being forced into debt."

"Not my problem," Harry said cheerfully.

"The Winter Lady is allowed to leave on three provisions," Dumbledore said, steeping his fingers together and peering at Harry over his half-moon glasses. "The first two are between Fawkes and Maeve, the third involves you. In exchange for safe passage to a safe location, Maeve must allow her daughter to stay here at Hogwarts with Harry for the rest of the school year."

"What?" Harry exclaimed furiously.

“What?” Maeve hissed coldly, ire rising over her beautiful features. She gave Harry a look of such venom that he had to resist the temptation to flinch. “Is this your doing?”

“What? No!” Harry exclaimed. He rounded on Dumbledore, the older man looking relatively unaffected by his dark glare. “What the hell is this, Dumbledore? You want me to look after a brat...” He paused and glanced down at the small child. “No offence...er...sweetie?”

The girl merely gazed at him with her emotionless eyes and Harry frowned.

“You’re kinda weird, aren’t you?” he asked, his ire temporarily forgotten as he squirmed on his feet. Whether it was because the girl was his daughter, his own flesh and blood, and he was a fifteen-year-old father to a seven or eight-year old girl, or whether it was because the girl was just damn creepy, he wasn’t quite sure.

“Yes,” The girl answered and for a moment Harry could have sworn her lips twitched.

“I still don’t want her here,” Harry declared. He opened his mouth to continue, but Meciél brushed up against his mind and he paused.

‘She is your daughter, beloved,’ Meciél reminded him.

‘What, you want me to...bond...with her?’ Harry thought at her in disbelief. ‘Meciél, I didn’t think you were into this type of sappy crap.’

‘If it makes you feel better, consider her a potential asset in the Winter Court,’ Meciél offered.

‘Nope, I don’t believe you at all,’ Harry said. ‘Face it Meciél, you’ve got a soft spot for kids. You’ve got a sappy, pathetic mortal heart.’

Harry was expecting her to sigh but she remained silent. Old pains and feelings of hers brushed up against him and for a split second, Harry felt a sense of desperate longing and ancient agony over wounds long past. He had never felt anything like this from her before

and frowned speculatively as Meciél clammed up. Perhaps there was some truth to his statement after all.

“Those are Fawkes’ terms,” Dumbledore said after a moment’s pause, when it was clear that Harry would not speak up again. He said it gently but with the air of a man who would not negotiate. “In matters relating to the Faerie Courts, her views take precedence. Maeve may take them or leave them.”

Harry could feel the strain in the air as several powerful beings, himself included, readied themselves for battle. Dumbledore turned to the Winter Lady, his eyes suddenly hard as he brushed off the dangerous look she was giving him as she unconsciously flexed her fingers.

“I highly recommend you against the later, my Lady,” he said politely. “This is my school and I have gathered a significant amount of power behind the wards. On the off chance you were able to defeat both me and Fawkes; you would not make it out of the castle alive.”

Maeve’s eyes flickered towards Harry.

“Don’t look at me,” Harry snorted, leaning back in his chair and adopting an air of ease that he was hardly feeling, Hellfire roaring into his veins. “I’d just sit back and watch, maybe finishing off the wounded party when the other gets killed.”

Dumbledore smiled and turned back to Maeve.

“The decision is yours,” he said simply.

“Very well,” said Maeve, her voice barely a whisper.

She glanced down at the small girl by her side and something passed between them, an unspoken communiqué that the both of them instantly understood. The girl bowed her head and Maeve nodded, looking satisfied. She turned to Harry and menace appeared on her face. Suddenly her arm shot forward and Harry grunted, her pale hand squeezing his throat and lifting him off the ground with surprising strength for a person of her size.

Behind his desk, Harry saw Dumbledore stiffen but make no other move. Even as the oxygen was blocked from his lungs, he embraced Hellfire and prepared to lash out at her with all of his unfocussed power.

"She is very valuable to me, my little Denarian Knight," Maeve hissed and her grip on his throat loosened. "Keep her unbroken."

"How motherly of you," Harry choked out.

Maeve narrowed her eyes and turned her head to face Dumbledore, whose face had gone icy cold. His body was radiating a sense of power and dark fury that Harry had only seen once or twice before, yet he made no move to assault the Winter Lady.

"You should have chosen me, old man," she hissed. She dropped her arm, took a step back and suddenly disappeared in a rush of icy-cold and bitter wind.

"What was that about?" Harry gasped out, leaning against the bookcase and gingerly rubbing throat. He released his grip on Hellfire, allowing the dark power to ebb away.

"That, Harry, is a story for another time," Dumbledore said, his eyes distant. Almost instantly, he transformed from an angry and powerful wizard into a cheerful and benign old man and gifted the small girl before them with twinkling eyes. "Now, what might your name be, my dear?"

"Amaris," the girl said, her voice barely more than a whisper. She brushed her dark hair from her emerald-green eyes. "My name is Amaris."

"Well, that is an interesting name," Dumbledore mused and glanced back at Harry, who had staggered up and was staring down at the girl with a strange expression. "I believe it means 'Promised by God.'"

“Maeve is such a bitch,” Harry muttered, then stopped and frowned when Amaris cocked her head, staring straight up at him. He fidgeted on his feet. “What? It’s true!”

Amaris didn’t say a word until Harry finally looked away, glancing back at Dumbledore.

“Okay, I’m going to leave before this child of Satan kills me with her evil eyes,” he said. He glanced down at his torn and bloodied robes. “Could you send me some new robes? Unless, of course, you want me to go to breakfast tomorrow and proclaim myself the veteran of a faerie war.”

“I will arrange it,” Dumbledore promised.

“Good,” Harry said with a satisfied nod. He turned to leave. “Have fun with the brat.”

“Oh no, Harry,” Dumbledore called out. “I’m afraid that Amaris is your responsibility.”

“What?” Harry uttered, the smile fading from his face.

“You are her father,” Dumbledore said, his lips twitching behind his beard. “I expect you to take good care of her.” His next words were delivered in a wry tone, like he didn’t believe them himself. “With any luck, you will learn patience, humility, respect for others and the deep-seated love that only a parent can feel for their child.”

“Fat fucking chance of that happening,” Harry snorted, folding his arms over his chest.

“Think of this as a unique opportunity,” Dumbledore said, rising from his seat and smiling down at both Amaris and Harry. “There has not been a student who has had a child at Hogwarts for several decades.”

“Where will she sleep? What will she do?” Harry asked, shaking his head in a useless gesture of denial. “Better yet, what the hell will I do?”

"That is your choice," Dumbledore said firmly, his eyes flicking towards Fawkes. The bird let out a soft trill and he smiled, glancing back at Harry. "I expect you will find suitable accommodation for her."

Harry made a disgusted face and glared at the beautifully-plumaged phoenix, which gazed back with wise and immortal dark eyes.

"This is all your fault, chicken-wings!" He hissed. Fawkes let out another trill and Harry somehow got the impression she was laughing at him. He narrowed his eyes and made a curt gesture with his hands.

"Amaris," he snapped, his eyes never leaving Fawkes. "Let's go."

As Amaris nodded and obediently followed his orders, Harry threw Fawkes a look filled with deadly promise.

"I promise you," he said coldly. "One day I am going to eat you!"

He turned around, opened the door and stormed down the staircase with Amaris in tow.

"So..." Harry said, almost squirming on his feet and experience feelings of awkwardness that he hadn't felt in years. "You're a kid, huh?"

"Yes," Amaris answered, her voice hushed as if she were used to whispering all of the time. "You are correct. I am a child."

Harry scratched his head, ignoring the whispering of one of the portraits he passed. He knew that the portraits of the former Headmasters that hung in Dumbledore's office were bound to silence for the most part, but that didn't stop them from being the worst gossips in the school. What else was there to do when you couldn't eat, drink, fight or fuck? He glanced down at the small child by his side, noting that her white gown was somehow in pristine condition, especially when compared to his bloodied and torn robes, and he frowned.

“We did just come from the same arse-kicking, right?” He asked her.

“I believe so,” Amaris said and paused, cocking her head to the side as a thought occurred to her. “Unless your trans-dimensional portal was significantly altered, enough to cause a rippling disturbance in the barrier between our worlds. If that is the case, then you could have come from a vastly different battle and the universe has reconstructed itself to avoid imminent catastrophe.”

“Ah,” Harry said and paused. “So...I see you know some pretty big words,” he finished lamely. He tapped himself with his wand, casting an illusion charm around himself to obscure the worst of the visible damage to his clothing. At least it would stop people from asking stupid questions.

“I am fluent in the mortal tongue, yes,” Amaris said. A flicker of concern crossed her face, the first sign of emotion she had shown him. “My words are correct, are they not?”

“Sorta,” Harry said and hesitated. He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, whatever. Why do I give a fuck?”

“What is fuck?” Amaris inquired as the two turned a corner and Harry paused in his step, swinging his incredulous gaze to her. For a moment it looked as if she were fidgeting under his stare as he loomed above her.

“Are you serious?” Harry demanded.

“Yes,” Amaris said, cocking her head in puzzlement. “Fuck is not a word that I have heard Maeve or any other use before. I wish to know of its meaning.”

“Fucking hell,” Harry groaned, raking his hand through his hair. He sighed. “Okay, Fuck is...sex,” he finished and rolled his eyes at Amaris’ confused expression. “Sex. You know, a thing men and women do? Rutting? Boinking? Shoving your dick into a woman’s...”

“Ah,” Amaris said with dawning comprehension and looked pleased.
“Fuck is Sporting.”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a relieved nod. He paused and prodded Meciél’s mental presence, noting that she hadn’t made him slap himself again. There was no response and concern flashed through his mind.

“Should I take that to mean that you wish to Sport with the realm of fire and punishment?” Amaris inquired curiously. She absently raked her hand through her long hair in an action reminiscent of her father.

“What?” Harry muttered as he led the small half-fae up the stairs and towards the Gryffindor Tower.

“You stated you wished to fuck hell,” Amaris said, her short stride struggling to keep up with Harry’s longer legs.

“No, that’s a curseword,” Harry explained distractedly, spotting one of the ghosts whispering to one of the portraits. The spectre pointed at him and Harry glared at it, wondering if it would be appropriate to rip out what remained of its soul and annihilate it.

“Ah, magic,” Amaris said with sudden understanding.

“No,” Harry snapped loudly, pausing in his step again, only a few metres away from the entrance to the Gryffindor Tower. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Fuck, I am either too old or too young to have a brat. Look kid, you’re not making this easy.”

“I apologise, Father,” Amaris said automatically and bowed her head.
“I accept whatever punishment you wish to bestow upon me.”

“Whoa, what?” Harry exclaimed and shook his head adamantly.
“Okay, two things if we’re going to get along. One, don’t call me that....father...thing.”

“Yes, Father,” Amaris responded immediately.

“...and two,” Harry said and stared down at the little girl’s blank green eyes, an almost-perfect reflection of his own. “No daughter of mine will ever apologise for something she’s done. If you do something that requires an apology then good for fucking you. No sense whining about it afterwards. And if you do get caught, then you sure as hell aren’t going to stand there and say you’ll accept your punishment! No, you kill the warden, grab the keys and get the fuck out of there.”

Amaris opened her mouth and paused, a strange expression flittering across her face. Harry suddenly realised what he was doing and stood back up, clearing his throat awkwardly and scratching his head. In his mind, Meciél stirred.

"Are we talking about sporting again?" Amaris asked after a moment's pause, looking puzzled, and Harry groaned, shaking his head and wondering why he was even bothering.

‘You have absolutely no idea as to what you’re doing, do you?’ Meciél thought to him wryly.

'Not a damned clue,' Harry sighed. He gestured to Amaris. "Okay, you little sex-obsessed brat, follow me. It's time to meet the rest of the retards that make up this school."

“This,” Harry declared loudly as he walked into the Gryffindor Tower, gaining the attention of the students who were still up in the Common Room at this time of a night. “Will be your new home for a while.”

“Hi, Harry,” Amanda greeted from across the room, waving at her reluctant friend and staring at Amaris with polite interest. She was sitting next to Hermione by one of the fires, the latter stooping over a bunch of scrolls and a very thick textbook. “Who’s your little friend?”

“Amaris, meet the most annoying person in my life,” Harry said dryly, gesturing at Amanda. Amanda rolled her eyes and smiled at the little girl. “Most annoying person in my life, meet Amaris. There, you’ve met. You can go away now.”

“You are one of his acquaintances?” Amaris asked softly, staring at Amanda with sudden interest.

“Acquaintances?” Amanda asked in puzzlement. “We are friends, if that’s what you mean.”

“Let’s not go too far,” Harry muttered.

“So, Amaris,” Amanda started, “You’re a little young to be starting Hogwarts.”

“I am not applying to become a student of this facility,” Amaris said with a somewhat snobbish tone. “I am here visiting...family.”

Amanda glanced at Harry and then back at Amaris, blinked, and then swivelled her gaze between the two as she pieced together the startling resembling between the two.

“You have family?” Amanda asked Harry in surprise.

“Technically, she’s my ward,” Harry responded, quickly weaving together a believable lie. “She’s a cousin from my mother’s side, apparently. Her mother has stuff to do- probably getting high on crack and ball-breaking innocent teenage virgins, so I’m looking after her for a bit.”

“But....how...” Amanda seemed to be at a loss, her mouth opening and closing furiously. She shook her head. “This is going to be fun-fun or insane. It’s a bit hard to tell at the moment.”

“Yes!” Harry said defensively.

“Hang on; they let you near a child?” Hermione asked doubtfully.

“No shit,” Harry deadpanned as the common room fell silent. “I mean, that’s just what I said, so it’s a big mystery as to how you managed to figure that one out, Bernstein.”

“Bernstein?” Amaris asked as Hermione gaped at him. “Is that some sort of mortal insult?”

“No,” Harry confided with a careless shrug. “I just think it sounds funny.”

“Hang on,” Amanda said, shaking her head in confusion. “How can she be your cousin? She’s at least six or seven, and didn’t your family...well, die, around that time.”

“Eight,” Amaris said smoothly. “I am eight mortal years old.”

“Mortal years?” Amanda asked shrewdly, eying Amaris speculatively. “Is she a...”

“Don’t ask,” Harry interrupted with a grimace. He saw Amanda open her mouth again and interjected before she could speak. “I mean it, don’t ask or I will bitch-slap you from here to the eighteen-hundreds.”

“Alright,” Amanda said, taken aback by his sudden manner. She fidgeted where she stood and quickly went back to sit down by Hermione.

“Okay,” Harry said with a sigh and turned to Amaris. “I’m going up for some rest. I’ll...see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Where shall I sleep?” Amaris inquired as he turned to leave.

“You guys sleep?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Yes,” Amaris answered, cocking her head as she regarded Harry. “I am half-human, after all.”

“Right,” Harry grimaced, his eyes darting around the common room. They were speaking in soft enough tones that most of the students weren’t able to hear her. “How could I forget?”

“While the human memory is predominately one of the better forms of organic information storage, there are several species who are able to retain and access memories to a far superior degree, myself included” Amaris explained and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Is there a point or are you trying to talk me to death?" Harry interrupted irritably.

"It would not surprise me if you had forgotten," Amaris summarised. "Also, my powers do not extend to voice manipulation of the Winter Source. I am incapable of talking you to death."

"You're giving it your best shot," Harry muttered. He sighed. "Okay, you can sleep down here in front of the fire tonight- use one of the couches or the floor or whatever the hell you want to, really."

"That is acceptable," Amaris answered primly, gazing around the warmly lit common room.

The students watched her with interest or bewilderment, especially a pair of Third Years sitting on the nearest of the plush couches. Harry narrowed his eyes and stared at them until they turned their gaze towards him. They both gulped and ducked their heads and Harry smiled in satisfaction.

"I'm going to head up into my dorm," Harry said after a moment, turning back to Amaris. "Er...yell if you need me, and try not to blow anything up."

"Very well," Amaris said and her lips twitched, something Harry had recognized as her attempts to smile. "I shall attempt to use one of these couches or the floor to get some fucking rest." She paused and frowned. "Was that correct? Would the 'fuck' go before or after the rest?"

"Well, strictly speaking, the fuck usually comes before resting, so you got it right in both contexts," Harry said and repressed a snigger at Hermione's outraged yelp. "But that's neither here nor there."

"Of course not," Amaris said. "We are not talking about a physical location, after all."

"Whatever," Harry muttered, turning his back and striding through the common room.

“Good night,” Amaris called out to him.

“Yeah, er...you too,” Harry mumbled, shaking his head but not even breaking his stride as he practically stormed up the staircase. Three out of the five beds had their curtains closed. He walked over to his bed, closed his curtains with his wand, sat down and slammed his fist down on the pillow.

“Fuck!” Harry growled loudly, partly because of the strange circumstances he had found himself in over the past twenty minutes but also because he had just slammed his fist into Dumbledore’s tome that he had hidden in his pillow.

He nursed his hand and was grateful when Meciél soothed his pain, already sending her power to help with the swelling of his knuckles. Most of the smaller wounds he had been inflicted with in the battle were already gone- Meciél had a far greater control over her hosts than all but one of the other Fallen, and Harry had already killed him.

‘You seem upset,’ Meciél noted.

“No shit,” Harry uttered dryly. He carelessly threw the cane-sheathed sword under his bed and flopped out on the large mattress. He sighed, more from weariness than despair. “What the hell have I gotten myself into now?”

‘Fatherhood,’ Meciél answered promptly.

“You’re funny, Meciél,” Harry mumbled. “Real fucking funny.”

‘This is a strange bargain Fawkes has wrought,’ Meciél mused and Harry felt her pushing back the turbulent emotions that had engulfed her ever since Amaris had arrived. ‘I have to wonder what that Summer Fae is getting out of this.’

“Probably some kinda evil faerie plot to manipulate me or something,” Harry muttered with a yawn and blinked his eyes rapidly. “You work on that while I sleep.”

‘The youth these days,’ Meciél grumbled good-naturedly as Harry closed his eyes and shuffled his head into the pillows, avoiding the one hiding the hard tome. ‘One little battle, coupled with the small surprise of discovering an illegitimate daughter, and they lose all of their energy.’

A/N:I've made a change to the end of the last chapter. Basically, Harry claims Amaris as a family relative instead of a daughter.

Anywho, those on DLP will know that this chapter went through a series of different stages after the first version turned out to be flawed, to say the least. A big thanks to those who helped me through it.

Harry held up his hand to block out the glaring sun from his eyes and peered forward intently, his eyes alight with eagerness and anticipation. He was standing on small plateau that rose high up in the sky. A vast and barren land stretched out around him, rolling out further than the eye could see. Tall and strange trees loomed up- some almost a hundred metres high- with leaves of an odd purplish colour. Perched in one of these trees was a bird-like creature, with a humanoid body, two large bat-like wings and a sharp-beak in place of a nose. It watched the spectacle that Harry was engrossed in with great interest, probably sensing a free meal when it was finished.

In front of Harry were two fierce and long-extinct creatures battling each other with tooth, nail and bone. Two bone-wryms, twice as large as what Harry could turn into, it, roared at each other with defiance as they charged at each other. The ground rumbled with their very steps as they slammed their claws into the armoured plate that protected their bodies, their eyes alight with eerie yellow glow of sentience.

"I'll bet you a twenty on the one on the right," Harry said excitedly. He was leaning up in a deck chair, a cold drink in one hand. "I can tell it's got a nasty right hook."

"Of course it does," Meciell said lazily. She stood at the head of Harry's chair, looking as pristine as ever with her flowing robes of white and silver silk. Her hair was bound back in an elaborate braid, held together by a clasp that almost seemed crude on her beautiful figure. "That one is trying to protect her children, after all."

"What?" Harry asked, his eyes never leaving the fight but a frown crossing the face. "I don't see any mini-wryms lying around."

“They wouldn’t be, not just yet,” Meciél answered, her arms folding over her chest and something flashing in her silver eyes. “But she can sense that she is pregnant. It gives her an edge over her counterpart, a reason to persevere over all else.”

“It’s pregnant?” Harry exclaimed in surprise and shuddered. “I do not want to know how bone-wryms have sex, I really don’t.”

“Oh, it’s quite interesting,” Meciél answered with a sly smile. “Each bone-wrym is an asexual creature, capable of producing its own eggs within its armoured belly as long as they have obtained a genetic sample of one of their kin. The eggs are created in a long, drawn-out procedure. After eleven months, the eggs have been developed enough for the bone-wrym to release them to land, where they will hatch in a matter of days.”

“Wait,” Harry said after a moment’s pause, finally glancing away from the two lumbering beasts. True to his prediction, the bone-wrym on the right had just smashed its thick, armoured tail into the other one’s exposed head, and was now slamming its large leg down on its opponents chest. “They’re asexual? Why did you call it a she?”

“I find it easier that way,” Meciél said with a hint of a smile.

“Does that mean my bone-wrym form is asexual as well?” Harry demanded and paused. Horror crossed his face. “Fuck, does that mean I can get pregnant?”

“Technically, if you were able to find a fresh sample of bone-wrym genetic code that is not yours...” Meciél started and trailed off. A bright smile crossed her face as Harry shook his head in despair.

“Thanks for ruining a perfectly good kick-arse for me,” he grumbled sourly. “Now I have to worry about old bones knocking me up.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Meciél said and smiled. “But who knows? Perhaps you will both be a father and mother one day.”

"Thanks for reminding me," Harry said tightly. He sighed and leaned back in his chair, content to enjoy the rather cool wind that brushed across his face. "What am I going to do with a brat?"

"I suspected something like this might happen one day," Meciél admitted. "Perhaps you should not have gone to the Nevernever after all...but, hindsight will not help you, not at this point."

"Hindsight is a bitch," Harry muttered. "You're going to help me with this, right?"

"I want to see how you deal with this," Meciél answered and there was a note of hesitance in her voice. Harry glanced up at her and saw that she looked troubled. "There is...do you recall that the reason I was banished from heaven?"

"You refused to kill something," Harry said with a shrug.

"I refused to kill the child of a human and angel," Meciél said and her face flickered with darkness, vestiges of an eternal rage stirring beneath her eyes. The clouds overhead rumbled ominously as the landscape changed to fit Meciél's mood. However, a moment later and it was all gone. "Since then, I have not had close contact with a child until- well, until you."

"Ah," Harry said, his interest peaked. "It's personal, then."

"Exactly," Meciél answered, sounding satisfied.

"So I have to do this by myself?" Harry demanded and scowled. "Shit."

Meciél was silent as Harry sighed, glancing around at the spectacular landscape around him. He stared at the purple-leaved trees, idly wondering what happened to that species.

"Destroyed," Meciél answered his unspoken question, gazing at the trees impassively. "Several hundreds of years from now, a disease will attack the entire ecological system of flora, almost decimating it completely. Species will die out, both plant and animal, new species

will evolve and arise and the world will change. All that has happened before will happen again.”

“Stop it,” Harry said, disgruntled. “I don’t like thinking about the world like that. It...”

“Makes you feel small?” Meciél offered.

“Pisses me off,” Harry translated.

“If it gives you any consolation, that last remnants of that virus twisted and mutated into what you know as the common cold these days,” Meciél added.

“Whatever,” Harry said airily. “Besides, I need to think about the here and now. I have more problems than that tree will ever have.”

“Speaking of which,” Meciél said, glancing up at the sky as if she were looking at something that he couldn’t see. “We are out of time.”

Harry didn’t get another word in as the world around him went white. Light flashed in his eyes and he gave an instinctual yelp as he shot up in his bed, rubbing his eyes blearily as he was returned to the real world. He sighed and rolled himself out of bed, his tiredness blasted away with a pure flash of Hellfire. It was much better than adrenaline.

“Alright,” Harry said to himself a few moments later.

He ran his hands over the new robes he had found at the end of the bed- he really didn’t want to know how Dumbledore had gotten past the charms he had placed around his curtains, the mere idea that the old man could have been watching him sleep was disturbing enough- and scratched his chin.

“Let’s do this,” Harry muttered. “Let’s go be a dad.”

“Fuck off!” Harry snarled, roughly shoving a burly seventh year out of his way. The boy had been standing in front of the fifth year dormitory staircase, chatting with a friend and refusing to move when Harry had tried to get past him. He must not have seen Harry come down, because when he stood up, anger clouded his face. He paused when

he saw the Denarian though, and slinked away quietly. He found that quite strange since, despite their inflated reputation for courage, most of the Gryffindors went out of their way to avoid him.

Apparently he scared them or something.

Harry strode forward and entered the common room. It was mostly empty and the rest were probably all finishing off their breakfast down at the Great Hall. The few that did remain were standing around the centre of the common room, muttering quietly to each other. Many of them sported looks of bemusement and when Harry appeared, they turned to glance at him.

"I know I'm gifted with magnificent beauty and charm, but kindly get the hell out of my way," Harry snapped, his sharp tone making a pair of first years squeak as they darted away.

The students parted and Harry saw the other object of attention. Amaris was sitting primly on the cold, hard stone floor, a small, thin blanket by her feet and a cushion bundled up into a make-shift pillow. Judging by the way one of the couches had been moved, it looked as if she had slept on the floor last night. She looked quite ridiculous, kneeling down on the cold stone floor with her eyes closed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harry asked. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as Amaris looked up, not looking at all concerned with the large amount of people around her.

"Sleeping on the floor," answered Amaris, her voice barely a whisper. "You did instruct me to partake of rest here, did you not?"

"I said couches as well," Harry said defensively as one of the students around him narrowed their eyes.

"The couches were too soft," Amaris said, using a pale hand to stroke at the cold stone ground. "I found the floor to be more comfortable."

"Sure you did," Harry muttered sarcastically.

"Yes, I did," Amaris repeated. "Did you not hear me the first time?"

"It's called sarcasm, brat," Harry said a tad sharply, narrowing his eyes at her somewhat-snobbish tone.

"Sarcasm," Amaris repeated thoughtfully. She gave him a decisive little nod. "Yes. That is interesting. I will look into this sarcasm of yours."

Harry stared at her suspiciously, wondering if she was trying to pull some kind of prank on him. She met his gaze, her eyes reflecting nothing more than a hollow soulless sensation that Harry got from all Fae, coupled with a sense of honest and innocent inquisitiveness about the world around her.

She really didn't know what sarcasm was.

"What are you, a retard?" Harry asked and winced when Meciél grumbled in anger in his mind. He scowled; Meciél was taking more of a liking to Harry's daughter than Harry was, although she seemed content to let Harry play it as he would.

"I do not think so," Amaris answered and paused, in deep thought. "I don't think I've ever considered it before. I shall have to look into it. Perhaps I am."

"I was joking," Harry muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Did you just call your cousin retarded?" somebody asked in outrage from the other side of the common room.

Harry rolled his eyes in irritation when he heard Hermione's loud and familiar voice.

"Why the hell are you always around to express your outrage and moral whatever-the-fuck-it is?" Harry demanded. He folded his arms and adopted a superior expression. "And as a matter of fact, I didn't tell her she was retarded, I just asked her. They're two different things. I can call you retarded if you like."

"You can't..." Hermione started, her eyes alight with furious indignation.

"Retard," Harry interrupted loudly.

"I don't..."

"Retard," Harry continued, a sneering smile playing on his lips. "On second thoughts, it's great that you're always conveniently here. It gives me an outlet to insult. Hey, Amaris, join in."

"Very well," Amaris said softly and turned her emerald-green eyes on Hermione. "You, mortal schoolgirl, are intellectually inferior. You are burdened with low intelligence and a limited ability to successfully function in the real world."

"Whoa," Harry said, as Hermione stared at the little girl in shock. Amaris folded her hands in her lap and stood, absently straightening out the small white dress she was wearing. "I like you already."

"She's not your slave!" Hermione said furiously. "You can't boss her around like that and expect her to do whatever you say?"

"I can't?" Harry asked in surprise. He snorted. "What's the point in people having kids then if they're not allowed to boss them around?"

"She's not your daughter," Hermione snapped and Harry paused.

"So?" He demanded a second later. "I'm in charge of her. Ergo, I get to tell her what to do."

Hermione opened her mouth with the righteousness that Harry had come to expect from her, but Harry waved it off.

"Amaris?"

"Yes?" Amaris answered quietly amidst the utter silence of the common room.

"I'm hungry," Harry answered, his eyes roving around the students and a sneer crossing his face. "Let's go get something to eat."

"An excellent idea, cousin."

"So how do you like being the centre of attention?" Harry asked wryly.

He was slouching in his seat and digging into the stacked plate of food before him with his bare hands. There were butter and bacon grease stains all over his robes as he hungrily devoured the first good meal since the battle.

"I find it irrelevant," Amaris answered softly.

In contrast, Amaris sat up straight, her face worked up into a grimace. She was cutting her small breakfast, which consisted of a piece of toast, a fried egg and a small rasher of bacon, with her cutlery. Between the two, it seemed as if Harry were the child and Amaris the adult- at least in regards to table manners.

Once the half-fae was done, she hastily dropped the gleaming steel instruments. Harry noted this with a raised eyebrow.

"Got the allergy to iron, huh?" Harry asked, glancing at his daughter's hands.

"Partly," Amaris answered honestly. "It does not harm me as such, but discomfiture it produces leads me to believe it is best to avoid it whenever I can."

"You know, you could have just said 'Sorta,'" Harry

"Sorta," Amaris tested slowly. "A merge of 'sort' and 'of' to create a single word, which shortens the time to finish a dialogue. Yes, I see."

"Right," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Whatever you say, brat."

"Brat?" Amaris echoed, looking up from her food with her blank emerald eyes. She appeared confused. "A term for a naughty,

disobedient or unpleasant child? Have I done something to displease you?"

"Wait...what?" Harry said quickly. He made a face, suddenly feeling awkward as he scratched his head. "No, it's just what...I call small and irritating people."

"I am irritating?"

"Amaris, everybody is irritating," Harry said dryly. "It all comes down to the degrees of annoyance..." He caught a sign of movement out of the corner of his eye and groaned. "Speaking about annoying- okay Amaris, just keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking."

"Mr Potter," Umbridge greeted quietly as she approached him

Ever since Harry had attacked her- not that she knew it was him- she had been a lot more quiet and timid than usual. . Faint residual scars littered her face, curse marks that Madame Promfrey had been unable to remove completely. The other day in Defence against the Dark Arts, Neville had dropped his textbook and she had shrieked, literally jumping off her seat and ducking behind her desk. Neville had been nursing his hand when he had come back from detention. Apparently she had gotten the confidence back up to use her quill. Harry debated with himself whether or not he should tell Dumbledore, but decided that it wasn't his problem and he really didn't give a shit.

Still, Umbridge was a manipulative, nosy bitch, and was quickly regaining the confidence she had once held in her authority and power. Harry briefly contemplated attacking her again as he turned his head to greet the squat woman.

"Good morning, Professor Umbridge," he greeted civilly and plastered an expression of concern across his face. "I see the scars have almost disappeared. That's good."

Umbridge smiled stiffly but Harry saw the shudder than ran through her body.

“Yes, yes, I am recovering quite well,” Umbridge said. Her beady eyes were drawn to the small and pale form of Amaris sitting by Harry’s side and a wide, slack smile appeared over her features. “Hello, little one,” she crooned. “Who might you be?”

Harry turned his head, looking as if he were watching and waiting for Amaris to speak. He screwed up his face and made a face, subtly jerking his head at Umbridge. Amaris’ lips twitched.

“I am Amaris,” the little girl answered. She cocked her head sideways and peered at Umbridge curiously. “And you are Professor Dolores Umbridge. You are the Under-secretary for the Minister of Magic. You graduated from Hogwarts with six NEWTS.”

“Well aren’t you a very smart little girl,” Umbridge praised sweetly, but her eyes flickered to Harry, who shrugged at her look, staring at Amaris with a baffled expression.

‘She does have access to Maeve’s intelligence network,’ Meciél said. ‘Although it is strange that Maeve is paying such close attention to the wand-wizard world. Faerie involvement with this world was removed long ago, with obvious exceptions. Even then, those Fae merely observe rather than act.’

“Fawkes,” Harry muttered and Meciél’s essence pulsed with agreement. He still didn’t understand the full details of why the Fae left the Wizarding world alone. Apparently, neither did Meciél.

“I’m sorry, Mr Potter, what was that?” Umbridge asked and Harry’s head jerked up, seeing that both Amaris and Umbridge were gazing at him.

“Forks,” he said unconvincingly, gesturing down at the gleaming metal cutlery on the table. “I was just thinking that they’re...really nice...and...I might get some...for home...so I can use them.”

“I see,” Umbridge said slowly, staring at Harry with a slow shake of her head. The notions of his madness or insanity that she had believed in were probably only increased after that little display.

"Was there something you wanted, Professor?" Harry asked bluntly.

"Oh, I just came down here to meet the latest edition to the halls of Hogwarts," Umbridge simpered and paused. Harry didn't even bother to hide his disbelief and she continued. "I also wanted to confirm something, because I fear I may have misunderstood something the Headmaster was telling me."

"Go on," Harry said suspiciously.

"It's just that Professor Dumbledore mentioned that a distant relative of yours was coming here to stay with you for the rest of the school year," Umbridge said slowly.

"That's right," Harry said, folding his arms across his chest. Where was Umbridge going with this?

"Well, when you went missing, the Ministry was given the task of compiling a full list of your distant relatives," Umbridge said and her smile widened, triumph flaring in her eyes. "I supervised the construction of that list, and personally interviewed every witch or wizard that claimed to be one of your relatives. I don't recall ever seeing a small girl."

"Oh, that's easy to explain," Harry said airily. "Amaris here is my first-cousin on my mother's side. All muggles."

"You don't have any cousins," Umbridge retorted, folding her arms over her chest. She gave him a sympathetic smile that he saw right through. "Your mother had only one sister, who had one son, and both were killed eight years ago."

"I do so have a cousin," Harry defended childishly. He gestured at Amaris. "See?"

"Hello," Amaris said tonelessly, gazing up at Umbridge. "He is my cousin."

"Yes, yes, hello dear," Umbridge said impatiently. "I suppose he could very well be your cousin. You do seem to have inherited Mr Potter's

disgusting habit of lying.” She turned back to Harry and something ugly sparked in her eyes. “Why do you persist in telling me these lies?”

Harry rolled his eyes but was surprised at the vehemence Umbridge had practically shouted that last question. The woman was practically looking rabid. He surreptitiously glanced over the Great Hall. Most of the students had already left- Harry was usually a late comer for breakfast, it made it easier to eat without a gaggle of morons gaping at him. The Professors were all gone as well. Umbridge had picked a good time to swoop down with her questions.

‘Wow,’ Meciél stated. ‘She...certainly has a dislike of lying.’

‘Probably a sexual fetish gone wrong,’ Harry thought wisely.

‘You have problems,’ Meciél said and Harry felt her disgust. ‘The mere thought of this thing procreating is enough to repulse even I, and I once inhabited a host who thought ritualised cannibalism was a good idea.’

‘How’d that work out for you?’

‘He ate one of his own arms the day after we met. I believe the bonding experience was especially traumatic for him, since he drowned himself soon after,’ Meciél confessed. ‘My coin spent the next two hundred years at the bottom of a swamp until I was able to influence a passer-by to fish me out.’

‘Wow,’ Harry thought. ‘Compared to that, I’m pretty much normal.’

‘You have no idea of some of the hosts I have taken over the centuries,’ Meciél sighed. ‘No idea.’

“Mr Potter!” Umbridge said loudly and Harry sighed, shaking himself out of his mental conversation and glaring at Umbridge with irritation. Despite herself, the squat witch flinched at his harsh gaze, but quickly reasserted herself.

"She's my cousin from my mother's side," Harry lied casually. "She was born just before the Dursley's were killed. Her step-mother is having some renovation problems, you know, an infestation of intruding parasites or whatever, so she sent her to me to look after. Ask Dumbledore, he'll confirm it."

'As soon as he hears it,' Meciél added.

"I see," Umbridge said carefully.

"She's my ward," Harry declared flatly and didn't like the way Umbridge's eyes rested on Amaris speculatively. He placed a hand on Amaris's shoulder in a show of possession and warning, and then repressed a shudder when a icy-cold sensation flared up his arm.

"Very well," Umbridge said. "Good day, Mr Potter, Ms..."

"Amaris," Amaris supplied.

Umbridge nodded and pattered off, her squat form waddling towards the entrance of the Great Hall. As soon as she was gone, Harry dropped his hand off the small girl's shoulder and winced. His fingers were trembling, frozen stiff by the icy power that had just rushed through him.

"Ow!" Harry complained, holding his freezing hand under his arm. "What the hell was that for?"

"My apologies," Amaris said and for once, Harry saw something like chagrin on her face. "I instinctively perceived a blow to my shoulder from behind as a threat and responded accordingly. Life in the Winter Court is dangerous, even for the daughter of the Winter Lady."

"Yeah," Harry mumbled distractedly, rubbing his fingers again. Hellfire flared in his mind, wiping away the rest of the residual Fae power from his hand and leaving it pleasantly numb.

"Strange," Amaris commented and she regarded Harry with a new respect. "That should have sent you- or any other foe- into a seizure, allowing me to finish them off as I wished."

“Meciel does a lot for my innate magical resistance,” Harry said dryly. He smiled at her with a cocky grin and waggled his numb fingers in front of her face. “Besides, I got a bit of power behind me, you know.”

“So I have heard,” Amaris remarked. “It was one of the key reasons behind my conception.”

There was a short pause.

“Way to turn a conversation awkward,” Harry said slowly. He sighed and glanced down at his watch. “Okay, I have things to do today. Go back to the Common Room and do...whatever. Just don’t draw attention to yourself and stay out of Umbridge’s way.”

He stood up, gave Amaris a half-hearted wave of his hand and left.

“Very well,” Amaris called at his retreating back as he left the Great Hall. She eyed the platter of bacon before her and with a click of her fingers, it suddenly stiffened and took on an bluish sheen as it was frozen. “That’s much better,” the small child said, looking pleased.

“Hey, Harry, I got it!” Amanda said cheerfully. The Denarians view of her body was distorted by the glimmering opaque orb of magic around her, which crackled, hissed and spewed showers of grey sparks.

“Wow,” Harry said dryly. “Good for you. I only learnt that spell when I was ten, but, good for you anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Amanda said happily. She frowned as she concentrated on the next part of the spell, and with a jerk of her wand, a loud boom roared through the air.

Harry swayed with the accompanying winds, looking bored rather than worried as the sphere of magic exploded from Amanda’s body in all directions, giving off enough force to send him from his feet. A quick flick of his wand kept him safe as chairs and desks were lifted up and thrown away with a loud clatter. The noise died down, except

for the last few crashes of a chair falling to pieces, and Amanda's harsh breathing.

The girl's eyes were open wide with surprise as she gaped at the destruction she had wrought on the abandoned classroom.

"Remember that the spell is only good for a five or so metre radius," Harry said dryly, scoffing at the awe in her eyes. "And that while the shield will deflect some medium-level spells, it'll crumble under a quick succession. Block the spell you want, turn your shield into an offensive weapon and strike at him while he's still stumbling."

"Right," Amanda said, clearing her throat and composing herself. She turned to Harry, watching him with an expectant look.

"Congelo doleo!" Harry called out.

His wand whipped out in front of him with a blur as he sent a streak of bright golden light forward, striking the chair he was using as his target with deadly accuracy. The chair shuddered and groaned under the power of the spell but did little else as the light dimmed. Harry nodded in satisfaction while Amanda looked confused.

"Did something go wrong?" She asked Harry in confusion.

"Nope," Harry answered happily, absently flicking his wand. "It's a Petrification spell. It wouldn't work on a chair, but it'll work on a human quite well. Not quite sure about non-human's yet, but hey, that's what animal testing's for."

Fallen chairs and tables flew through the air as Harry tidied up the room as best he could. One of the desks had splintered and crumbled to the point where no charm could fix it, another had been subjected to the repairing charm so many times that it crumbled into dust when Harry tried it again.

"Can I ask you a question?" Amanda asked him.

"If I say no, will you listen?" Harry asked dryly, flicking his wand at one of the newly restored tables. A shower of yellow sparks fell out but nothing else happened, and he frowned. "Damn it!" He snapped.

"Did you know it's rude to answer a question with a question?" Amanda asked him, a teasing grin on her face.

"Even if it was rhetorical?" Harry asked, mostly concentrating on his wand as he flicked it experimentally.

"You did it again," Amanda said good-humouredly.

"And you didn't," Harry said. He settled into an easy pose, then struck out with his wand with a blur of movement. The petrification curse spilled from the tip as easily as before, striking a chair and causing it to shudder. Harry nodded in satisfaction and turned to Amanda, throwing her a quick grin. "Ergo, I win."

"That's a weird word," Amanda mused. "Ergo. I wonder who thought that word up."

'The ancient Romans,' Meciell answered with a hint of disdain. 'Latin is hardly a great mystery, although I suppose we cannot expect too much from her.'

"Wow," Harry said sarcastically. "You're acting stoned today, aren't you? Has somebody been doing a little sniffing of Snape's potion fumes?"

Amanda rolled her eyes, shaking her head in exasperation.

"So, what's the question?" Harry inquired, taking a deep breath and leaning on one of the desks.

"Where did your cousin come from?" Amanda asked and paused. "I mean, is she really your cousin at all? There was something about her that was just so creepy..."

"Thank you," somebody said, right behind Harry.

The Denarian Knight gave a strangled yell of surprise, twisting around with reflexes too fast to be seen by Amanda, his hand diving in his robes, pulling out his wand and levelling it at the intruding figure in the space of a heartbeat. Hellfire blazed in Harry's eyes and the runes on his wand flickered with light as he prepared to deliver a powerful curse of death and destruction on....the small girl.

"Jesus Fuck!" Harry swore, lowering his wand and glaring at Amaris in annoyance. The little girl tilted her head, absently smoothing down her pure white gown as she walked forward.

"Hello, cousin," she greeted. She peered at Amanda curiously. "Hello, most-annoying person in my cousin's life."

"Hi," Amanda said, waving back with a bemused smile.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harry growled at his daughter, his heartbeat slowly returning to normal as the Hellfire flowed out of his system and back into the void from whence it had come.

"Watching," Amaris answered simply.

"Gee, you think," Harry snapped sarcastically. He raked a hand through his hair and sighed loudly.

"Harry!" Amanda scolded. "Be nice!" She turned to Amaris. "It's nice to meet you...Amaris, was it?"

"Hey," Harry interjected roughly, jabbing Amanda on the chest. "Don't tell me how to emotionally abuse my own family, alright, brat?"

"Is she a brat too?" Amaris wondered and Harry smirked, giving a decisive nod.

"You bet," he declared viciously. "She's a naughty, disobedient and unpleasant child."

"She is hardly a child," Amaris said and tilted her head in that strange manner again, regarding and assessing Amanda with emotionless eyes. "The curve of her hips and the size of her breasts indicate that

she is during the transitional stage between child and adult, most likely capable of giving birth to human offspring.”

Amanda choked, her eyes flickering down to look at her chest as she instinctively covered them with her arm. Colour flushed her cheeks and she gave Amaris an annoyed, outraged look.

“Hey!” she exclaimed.

“She’s just telling the truth,” Harry said, eying Amanda with a leering smirk. He gazed up and down her body and smiled. “Perhaps we should get a closer look, do you think?”

“I’ll hex your balls off,” Amanda threatened heatedly, but although her cheeks were burning red, a smile was tugging at the end of her lips.

“I haven’t taught you that spell yet,” Harry said, waving off her threat easily.

“There’s a spell for that?” Amanda asked in surprise.

“There’s a spell for everything,” Harry said mysteriously. “You just need to know where to look for it.”

“That makes...no sense whatsoever,” Amanda said slowly. “You’ve been spending too much time with Dumbledore.”

“No, you make no sense,” Harry interjected. Amanda frowned, her face scrunched up in confusion.

Amaris watched the byplay with keen interest until Harry turned back to her, a frown on his face.

“What are you doing down here?”

“I grew weary of the insufferable attempts by many of those mortal children to approach and engage my attention,” Amaris answered and displeasure flashed on her face. “Were that accursed Fae of Summer not here, I would have shown them the true meaning of entertainment.”

“Oh, I’ve been there,” Harry sighed. “Sometimes you just wanna...” he made a vicious motion with his hand and Amaris nodded.

“Yes, exactly like that,” she said, sounding pleased.

“Hang on,” Amanda broke in. “Fae? Mortals? I knew there was something...well, weird...about her.”

“Long story short, she’s a faerie,” Harry told her bluntly. “From Winter.”

“What’s she doing here?”

“Remember Maeve?” Harry asked. “The Faerie who lent me the magic to kill that Drakon?”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed and she unconsciously scowled in anger, remembering the time the Winter Lady had approached Harry during the Winter’s Ball, especially remembering the slutty gown the Fae had worn.

“I remember her,” she answered in clipped tones.

“Well, I needed to pay her back,” Harry said and paused. “I suppose...Amaris being here is directly related to my debt.”

‘In more ways than one,’ Meciél murmured, but was otherwise silent.

“Oh,” Amanda said slowly. She frowned. “I don’t get it, but I suppose it’s none of my business.”

“See, this is why I let her hang around me,” Harry confided to Amaris. “She learns quickly. She’s still an idiot, but she’s not a moron anymore.”

“I understand,” Amaris said with a nod. “The repressed tension between you two would also contribute into this friendship, yes?”

“Repressed tension?” Amanda asked with a laugh.

"Yes," Amaris answered. She pointed at Amanda. "You," she started, shifting her aim to Harry. "Wish to sport with him."

"Sport?" Amanda asked, while Harry groaned.

"Don't put ideas in her head," he said tiredly. "She's Catholic, and you know what that means."

"What does sport mean?" Amanda asked suspiciously, but was ignored by both of them.

"I suppose you want to stay here?" Harry asked his daughter.

"It would be preferable," Amaris answered.

"Alright," Harry said with a shrug. "Just...duck if you see a spell heading your way. If you get hurt, I get hurt, if you get what I'm saying."

"I do not understand," Amaris said, her brows furrowed.

"Your Mum's a bitch," Harry said bluntly. "And not the female-dog kind, cause you don't have a tail. She's a mean, nasty, immoral piece of work who would rip me in two if you so much as got a scratch on you."

"I do understand that," Amaris said, and a ghost of smile flittered across her face. "Mother can be quite...temperamental."

"Tell me about it," Harry muttered. He raised a hand to silence and increasingly frustrated Amanda, and gestured at the other side of the room. "Okay, why don't you go and sit in the corner and play with your colouring books or lego or whatever the hell you eight years olds do while me and Amanda blow some shit up- well, I'll blow shit up and she might make a table or two rattle."

"I shall consider it," Amaris said and paused. "I am in need of ideas. My usual forms of entertainment are not valid here, as there is no snow here. What did you do when you were my age?"

“Well,” Harry started, nodding his head. “Generally I ran around killing people and stealing crap.”

“Can I kill somebody?” Amaris asked with a touch of eagerness.

‘The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it?’ Meciél murmured and there was a touch of longing in her voice as she regarded Amaris through Harry’s eyes. ‘She is more like you than you realise.’

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said with bark of laughter.

There was a sudden loud clash as Amanda brought her wand down in a shower of silver sparks.

“Will somebody tell me what ‘sport’ is meant to mean?” She called out loudly.

A/N: I've had a few reviews saying that the 'sudden' revelation that Meciél refused to kill a human/angel kid was a little rushed. Actually, that was just a recap of from what I declared in DR in chapter one and a few other places. Apparently some of you forgot... ;)

"Are all mortal children as irritating and stupid as the ones that occupy this derelict fortress?" asked Amaris, her soft voice curious as she and Harry strode down one of Hogwarts's hallways.

It had only been a few days since she had arrived at Hogwarts, and already the rumour mills had gotten to work. So far, Amaris had been the daughter of everyone from Dumbledore, to "You-Know-Who", to Snape, to Harry himself. Surprisingly, it was the truth that was considered the most unlikely, which Harry attributed as evidence to the notion that irony was the most powerful force in the universe.

Barring himself, all of the above candidates made Harry shudder at the very thought. As if Maeve would ever touch Snape. She'd probably have no trouble in going for Voldemort, considering his power outstretched Harry's own, or Dumbledore- although the old man had seemingly rejected her once before, apparently.

"Generally, no," Harry answered. His lips twisted up into a rueful smile "They're usually much, much worse. Look, just give them a few choice threats, you know, 'I'll break your fucking legs if you so much as breathe in my direction' or 'Do you breathe, and would you like to continue doing so?' and they'll shut up."

"I see," Amaris said, trailing after Harry as he turned a corner. Her long, dark hair whipped behind her as she pattered after him. Harry hadn't been able to find a pair of shoes for her, and doubted that she would want to wear them anyway.

She was a weird kid; he had to give her that.

"What a coincidence," Harry retorted sarcastically. "I can see too."

He was glancing up and down the corridor and then opening up the door to his latest training area. Professor Umbridge had finally clued in on Harry's occupation with the lower areas of the castle, where he

frequently used one of the abandoned classrooms to train. She had already found the first classroom he had been using, using it as evidence that students were disobeying her vaunted Educational Decrees and launching an investigation.

“Metaphorically speaking, of course,” Amaris answered, with the strange twitch of her lips that indicated a smile.

“Sarcasm beats your logic any day of the week,” Harry declared triumphantly, opening the door and glancing inside.

He flicked his fingers and soft silver flames exploded in his open palm, illuminating the room. It was another old and abandoned classroom, full of dust, old spider webs and a cracked blackboard.

“We have no concept of mortal timeframes in the Winter Court,” Amaris said, walking inside and sitting down primly on one of the desks. “As such, I am triumphant.”

“You mean, ‘I win’,” Harry corrected absently, turning around and locking the door behind him with his wand.

“That is what I said,” Amaris said, with an owlish blink of her eyes.

“No, you said you were triumphant,” Harry said, walking to the front of the classroom and eying the desks speculatively. There were only five of them; the rest had probably been moved to a newer classroom.

“They have similar, if not identical, meanings, do they not?” Amaris asked and Harry sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Sure, they mean the same thing but they sound different,” he said irritably. “One of them is a short and uncomplicated word, the other is the opposite.”

“I am merely displaying my linguistic prowess,” Amaris said quietly.

“No, you’re merely displaying what other’s think is an attitude problem,” Harry said. He smiled at her lazily. “It makes them think you think that you’re better than them.”

"They are mortals," Amaris said disdainfully, her nose wrinkling. "I am better than them. Why should I not show it?"

"Because it makes you seem like a snobby little bitch," Harry declared flatly.

Amaris tilted her head and regarded him curiously.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not really," Harry said with a shrug. "But if you're trying to stay incognito, it's better if people weren't talking about you all of the time, even if it just to gossip on how much of a bitch you are."

"I understand," Amaris said.

She perched at edge of the desk and peered at Harry inquisitively as he raised his wand, banishing one of the sturdy wooden desks to the middle of the room. An instant later, a streak of shimmering pale-blue light blasted forward and the desk stiffened and froze, a loud cracking noise echoing in the classroom as ice crept over the wooden surface.

"In honour of the Winter Court," Harry said dryly.

"We thank you," Amaris replied evenly.

"Wait," Harry said quickly, spinning around and pinning Amaris with a disbelieving smile. "Did you just make a sarcastic jibe?"

"No," Amaris said, looking faintly puzzled.

"Oh," Harry said slowly. He shrugged. "Never mind then."

"I have noticed that you seem to display many paranoid tendencies," Amaris commented as Harry turned back to the frozen desk, releasing it from the spell with a wave of his wand. "For example, you are constantly assessing the number and nature of people around you. I have seen it many times already. You are also here, alone, practicing offensive spells in the darkness. Why do you do that?"

"I may be paranoid, but it doesn't mean that I don't have a big penis," Harry declared. He paused and frowned. "I think that's how it goes."

"Very...wise," Amaris said slowly. "Is that why you come here? To further lengthen the size of your penis? I was not aware that it worked for wand-wielding mortals like that."

"That was a joke, Amaris," Harry deadpanned. "Remember what I told you about jokes?"

"Ah, yes," Amaris said. "My apologies."

"Right, whatever," Harry said. "Paranoia helps, you know. A wise man once said 'If a lifetime of paranoia saves you once, then...good for you.'"

"The words of a mortal philosopher?" Amaris queried.

"No, I said it about three seconds ago," Harry said, looking pleased with himself. Amaris' face didn't change and Harry rolled his eyes. "Paranoia helps. It keeps you alive and- Amaris, look out behind you!"

Amaris' eyes widened at the expression of true panic on Harry's face as he raised his wand, a blur of magic shooting over her shoulder faster than she could move. She whirled around as the light flashed past her, green and scarlet orbs of faerie power pooling in her tiny hands as she prepared to deliver a mighty blow upon....absolutely nothing at all.

She heard a chuckle and turned around to see Harry sniggering, a gleeful smile stretching from one side of his face to the other as he shook his head in amusement.

"I can't believe you fell for that," Harry crowed a few moments later, his face red with amusement as his laugh died away.

"You are-how do the mortals put it?" Amaris mused. "Ah, yes," she pointed at Harry seriously. "You are a git, father."

“Ouch,” Harry winced. “Bringing out the ‘F’ word. That’s low,” giving her a thump on the shoulder. He was quick to move his hand away, and turned back to the desk, readying his wand for another spell.

“So, why are you here?” He asked casually, reducing one of the tables into pile of twisted and splintered wood with a well-cast effodio.

“You said that I was allowed to accompany you as long as I ‘stayed out of the damn way’ and ‘don’t get your head blown off’,” Amaris answered simply. As Harry rolled his eyes, she continued. “However, if your question is referring to a broader sense, then I am here because you had sex and impregnated my mother.”

Harry choked and stumbled during mid-spell. He turned to Amaris with a strangely disturbed expression.

“How old are you again?” He asked wryly.

“Eight,” Amaris responded.

“Right,” Harry muttered. “I keep forgetting.”

“You did ask me,” Amaris pointed out.

“I meant, why are you here...as in, why did you stay here? At Hogwarts?” Harry clarified. “What are you getting out of this?”

“I stayed because Mother ordered it,” Amaris said, puzzled, as if there could be no better reason. “And I expect I will obtain nothing of significance for the duration of my stay here.”

Harry sighed.

“What the hell is Fawkes up to?” He mused softly. “Why this?”

“Summer Fae are notoriously manipulative,” Amaris pointed out and there was a sharp edge to her voice, something Harry had never heard before. “On a cursory glance, they seem to be more approachable and likable to mortals. But they are manipulative and meddlesome, where we are honest and up-front with our feelings.”

"You'll just jab a dagger into their chests, while Summer makes somebody else do it for them," Harry translated.

"In a sense, yes," Amaris said with a strange, little smile.

Harry shook his head in amusement, turning back to one of the desks and lifting his wand. With an elaborate flourish, he summoned a roaring wave of fire and hurled it forward. The desk exploded in a cacophony of heat and light, and Harry grinned, feeling quite satisfied.

"There's nothing like blowing something up for the hell of it," he said, with a grin plastered across his face. He glanced at Amaris, who was frowning as if pondering something.

"Father, may I ask you for something?" She spoke up a few moments later.

"You can ask," Harry said lazily, lowering his wand. "I probably won't say yes, but sure, ask away."

"Very well," Amaris said. "I wish for you to hug me."

"Whoa, what?" Harry exclaimed, quickly taking a step back. "Where's this coming from?" He glanced around and then gazed down at his daughter with narrowed eyes. "Did Amanda put you up to this? She's not here yet, is she? I bet she is- come out brat, before I make you come out."

"The blonde mortal has not asked me to do anything," Amaris said, tilting her head and peering at Harry curiously. "Indeed, she seems to be quite intimidated by me. I do not see why you bother to amuse yourself with her acquaintance."

"She's got some power behind her, and I've saved her life a few times," Harry said with a shrug. "She owes me. It means she'll be useful in the future- well, as useful as any normal witch can be."

He pronounced the last word as if it was something to be less-than-desired.

“Regardless,” Amaris said, focusing on her question. She gazed up at Harry with her solemn eyes. “I want a hug.”

“Okay...I’m gonna have to ask why?” Harry drawled a moment later. He was suddenly feeling quite uncomfortable.

“Because I wish to ascertain their function,” Amaris answered.

“People use them to....express...er...caring?” Harry struggled, and paused. “Lets just say it’s a sporting thing,” he concluded.

“Sometimes, yes,” Amaris conceded. “I have seen mother engage in a hug with several of her partners...”

“Your mother lets you watch?” Harry interrupted in surprise.

“She says it’s educational,” Amaris replied smoothly.

“That one’s got problems,” Harry muttered.

“But there are other times when a so-called hug lacks any sporting sentiment behind them,” Amaris finished, a pouting frown on her face. “I do not understand it, I really do not.”

“Whatever,” Harry sighed but shrugged his shoulders. “Alright, why the hell not?” He took a step forward and paused. “You’re not going to zap me, are you? That includes all your little fae spells as well.”

“No,” Amaris answered quietly, looking pleased.

“Swear by it?” Harry pressed.

“Yes,” said Amaris.

“Okay,” Harry said. He frowned bent down to wrap his arms around his daughter, giving her a quick, millisecond hug. An instant later, he backed away hurriedly. “Satisfied?”

“A few more moments longer, if you please,” Amaris said.

Harry rolled his eyes and hugged her again. It was harder to tell who was the most tense, Amaris or Harry himself. Gradually, however, Amaris began to slowly relax.

"Interesting," she mused.

She moved her arm behind his neck, much to Harry's chagrin, who was starting to feel more than a little uneasy. Just as he was about to break away, Amaris laid her head on his shoulder in a perfect display of father-daughter bonding.

Then she nibbled on his ear.

"What the hell!" Harry spluttered and yanked himself from Amaris, her teeth still on his earlobe. Amaris blinked as Harry stumbled away, desperately feeling at his ear and gazing down at Amaris with shock. "What the hell was that?"

"I was trying to convey affection as I have seen my mother do so," Amaris said quietly. She frowned and looked worried. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Right, I'm going to leave now," said Harry, his voice low and even. "When you're done in here, get back to the Tower...and, yeah."

He quickly spun around and practically bolted from the room, leaving a bemused half-fae staring at his back. Amaris tilted her head at his departure.

"He is a strange one," she mused out loud.

A few moments later, the door opened and the blonde mortal walked in, a bright smile on her face. Amaris paused at the sight of her, trying to see what her father saw in the girl.

"Oh," Amanda said slowly, awkwardly. "Amaris. I...er...was expecting Harry."

"He left a short while ago," Amaris said quietly.

"And he left you alone?" Amanda asked, sounding scandalized. She eyed Amaris with softness in her eyes, something that Amaris found both curious and repulsive.

Mortal emotions; as disgusting as they were intriguing.

"I..." Amaris started, considering Amanda carefully. After a moment, she concluded that perhaps the mortal would be the best to help her. "I tried to express my affection with a hug. It did not go so well. I do not believe he is used to affection."

"Oh, Amaris," Amanda said sympathetically- yet another strange emotion. She reached down and squeezed Amaris' hand in what she thought was a comforting manner.

Amaris withheld the natural instinct to destroy the foreign intrusion against her flesh and gazed down at the gesture curiously.

"You hang in there," Amanda said softly. "Be persistent. Harry's...well, he's cold, but he's not made of stone. You'll break though one day, and he'll lighten up."

"I understand," said Amaris. As Amanda smiled, Amaris tilted her head curiously. "Perhaps you can enlighten me. What is the purpose of clasping hands like this?"

"Maeve, you are a kinky bitch," Harry muttered to himself as he stalked through the of the portraits eyed him curiously as he strode past, and stroked his long beard thoughtfully

'Your daughter is quite odd,' Meciél said, and Harry could hear the amusement in her voice.

"Well, she doesn't get it from me," Harry grumbled.

'I agree,' Meciél said. 'The Fae are not human, no matter how well the Sidhe can take human form. I am not talking about biological differences, I am talking about psychological and emotional changes as well. For Amaris, however, she is both human and Fae until she

makes her decision and embraces one side of her heritage. She can become a High Sidhe of the Winter Fae, like her mother, or...'

"A regular human being, like her dear old dad," Harry finished out loud. He snorted derisively. "Please, it's not hard to see what she's going to pick, if she hasn't picked already."

'She hasn't,' Meciél said quietly. 'To choose a side means completely disowning another. Had she chosen her Fae side, she would lose any little expressions of human emotion. Alternatively, had she chosen her human side, she wouldn't be able to wield her powers.'

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking here?" Harry said grimly.

'Perhaps,' Meciél said. 'If Amaris chooses her human half over her Fae side, then not only would be it a blow against Winter with the loss of a potential successor to the throne of the Winter Lady, but Fawkes would gain a personal victory over Maeve.'

"Probably both," Harry said, turning a corner. "I got the sense that Fawkes and Maeve really didn't like each other, and it was more than the normal Winter/Summer rivalry. "

'Had they the chance, I have no doubt they would battle each other until one was dead,' Meciél agreed.

"Maeve's smart enough not to put her personal feelings in the way of the interests of the Winter Court," Harry said, as he turned a corner. He almost barged right into a tall dark-haired boy, who hurriedly side-stepped as Harry went past. "She doesn't have the balls to start a war against Summer- not at the moment, at least."

The boy that Harry had strode past was scowling at him and muttered something under his breath, a sneering flickering across his face. A normal human would have barely picked anything up, but Harry whirled around, meeting the Slytherin's haughty gaze with an irritated scowl.

"What was that?" He demanded.

To his credit, the Slytherin didn't back down and met Harry's scowl with a superior smirk.

"I was just saying that maybe you really are as crazy as the papers say you are," the boy answered lazily. Harry vaguely remembered him as loop or knot or tie; he was sure it had something to do with rope.

"The papers say I'm crazy?" Harry asked in honest surprise. The most he used the Daily Prophet for was wiping away a puddle of spilt pumpkin juice away from his plate at breakfast.

"Oh, yeah," the Slytherin said viciously, smirking at Harry's surprised look. "They think you're a nut-job, an attention-seeking prat who's making up rumours about the Dark Lord because he's bored, or because he's a dark wizard as well. Your name is synonymous with insane, spoiled, arrogant and lazy."

"You agree with them," Harry said flatly.

"Maybe," the other boy said, a smile twisting at his lips.

"I am not lazy, you know," Harry said defensively. He paused and scratched his head. "Can't say much about the first three, although, it's not arrogance if you're really better than everybody else. As for insane, well," Harry smiled chillingly and leant forward. "I have a voice in my head telling me to hurt you, right now. Does that make me insane?"

'I said no such thing,' Meciell said crossly, a teasing edge to her voice. 'I think you're misrepresenting my interests, Harry. Perhaps I should hire a new agent.'

"I'll introduce you to my spleen," Harry said dryly, leaning back. The other boy blinked, looking confused. "He's good at talking, really, he never shuts up. Perfect organ for the job."

The Slytherin shook his head in disgust.

"You really are insane," he said.

“You think that, huh?” Harry asked aggressively.

Perhaps he was a bit too aggressive, because the Slytherin sensed trouble on the horizon and dove his hand into his robes. Harry waited till the last second, then his arm blurred as he brandished his wand forward and sent a scarlet jet of light right into the boy’s chest. The boy was thrown aside, his wand ripped from his hand and clattering to the ground. A moment later, Harry whipped his wand over the other student with a vicious grin.

“Presenting for all you folks that live in my head and make me insane, the fantastical, human basketball!” Harry crowed loudly.

The Slytherin gave a loud scream as an invisible force grappled onto his leg and lifted him up into the air. A flick of Harry’s wand sent the boy shooting off down the corridor, a grin on Harry’s face as he listened to the Slytherin’s desperate cries for help.

“Wait!” Harry said loudly, power rushing through his veins. With another flick of his wand, the boy soared back down the corridor towards Harry. “Is it...can it be? It is!”

He whipped his wand up and the Slytherin shot towards the ceiling. A moment later, Harry broke the spell.

“Slam dunk!” Harry exclaimed, tilting his head up. He frowned.

The Slytherin was clutching one of the beams, a terrified expression on his face. Something tumbled from his pocket and fell to the ground a few seconds later and shattering, and the boy swallowed, tightening his grip on the wooden beam.

“Let me down!” He said shrilly.

“Well, I’d like to,” Harry called back cheerfully. “But I’m spoiled and lazy, so I can’t be bothered raising my wand. However, I’m also arrogant, so if you stroke my ego enough and make me think I’m the only one that can help you, I just might.”

The boy remained stubbornly silent, although Harry hadn't been expecting anything else. He had noticed that while some Slytherin's lacked the cunning and slyness that was supposedly their dominative traits, they more than made up with it with their arrogance and pride.

Harry would have made a great Slytherin, he thought.

"Harry!" Somebody called.

Harry turned his head to see that Amanda was quickly striding towards him. Amaris followed behind her, looking strangely hesitant.

"Harry, why did you leav-" Amanda started. She stopped, gazed up and the ceiling and gasped at the sight of the Slytherin. "Harry! What are you doing?"

"Exercising," Harry said blandly.

"Let him down," Amanda said with a groan. When Harry didn't move, she whipped out her wand and silently cast a spell.

The Slytherin was yanked from the ceiling and gently drifted down to the ground. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he was moving, only stopping to pick up his wand before dashing back towards the dungeons.

"You can be such a bully," Amanda said crossly. "What sort of example do you think you're setting for Amaris?"

"I am aware of your violent tendencies," Amaris spoke up quietly. "Mother has relayed much information to me about him."

"Mother?" Amanda repeated. She frowned. Although she knew more than most of the other students- she was aware that Amaris was a Fae, and that Maeve had something to do with it, she wasn't aware that Harry was Amaris' father. "Hang on, I thought she was- the Winter Lady is your mother?"

"Yes," Amaris answered her. The little girl turned her head back to Harry.

“So, what’dya think of what you had seen?” Harry asked lazily.

“I have watched you extensively,” Amaris started slowly. She looked like she was taking her time in gathering her thoughts.

‘That’s kinda creepy,’ Harry thought.

‘What did you expect?’ Meciél asked.

“From what I have seen, I believe I have gathered enough information to accurately create a personality profile,” Amaris started. She gestured at Harry and Amanda listened with interest.

“You...are a cruel, sarcastic and snide teenager, whose proficiency at wand-wielding is only enhanced by the symbiotic bond you share with the Denarian, Meciél,” Amaris started. “You are needlessly immature and childish, take great amusement in the painful misfortunes of those around you and enjoy participating in battles that you are confident you can win.”

“Well, yeah,” Harry said after a few moments, scratching his head. “But I would have said it differently.”

“You forgot to mention his constant fixation on sex,” Amanda said wryly.

“You do know that if you offered to sport with him, he would not say no?” Amaris said curiously. “He is most keen on...exercising, if you will.”

Harry choked and none-to-gently tapped her on the head, while Amanda let out an exasperated growl.

“Somebody has to tell me what that means!” She snapped. When Harry and Amaris didn’t comment, she rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Anyway, Harry, there’s a...” she paused to look around. “DA meeting on tonight. Can you come in and show us some more stuff?”

“Alright,” Harry said casually. Amanda gave him a beaming smile and then was off, leaving Harry and Amaris alone in the corridor.

“You acquiesced rather quickly,” Amaris noted. “From what I have observed, you do not enjoy socially interacting with your peers.”

“Ah, Amaris, let me tell you something about minions,” Harry started lazily, throwing his arm around his small daughter’s shoulder. “They’re only as good as you make them. Think of it like a garden. If you don’t tend to it enough, it’ll die and become worthless. If you tend to it too much, you’re wasting precious time that could be used to clean your toe-nails or something. But, if you tend to it just enough, they’ll grow by themselves and will soon become weeds that’ll piss off people who like gardens.”

“I understand,” Amaris said, using the tone that Harry had identified as when she didn’t understand. He was right. “Am I to understand that mortal children are flora in nature?”

Harry rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

“Alright,” Harry called out loudly. He stood in the Room of Requirement, pacing in front of the DA (although he still didn’t actually know what that stood for- he was assuming Dork Alliance or something.)

‘Dork Alliance? How...creative,’ Meciél murmured in amusement.

‘Hey, I suck with acronyms, alright?’ Harry thought defensively.

‘I suppose I should be impressed that you actually know what the word ‘acronym’ means,’ Meciél mused.

“By now, most of you know a few spells,” Harry said, giving Meciél one last prod with his mind and focusing his attention on the students. He paused and scratched his head. “Sure, most of the spells are little pissy-girls spells that I wouldn’t be caught dead using, but they could still be useful in a fight...maybe....if you were trying to beat up a baby or something.”

"We get it," Ron sighed loudly, trading an exasperated look with a dark-skinned wizard that Harry recognized as a fifth year from his dorm, although he had never spoken to him before.

"I'm just saying," Harry placated, raising his hands in a placating manner, but smiling wolfishly at the titters and grumbles of the twenty-five strong group.

"Was there a point?" Hermione asked sourly.

Harry had heard that she had been scheduled to tutor the DA before Amanda had arranged for him to come in, so she was holding some hard feelings over that. Harry hadn't pegged her for a power-hungry bitch, but he supposed it was always the prudish ones.

"How about you shut up?" Harry asked, narrowing his eyes at her in annoyance.

"How about no?" Hermione shot back sarcastically.

"Look, do you want to get up here and teach these brats?" Harry began.

"Yes!" Hermione exclaimed furiously, stamping her foot on the ground and folding her arms over her chest. Her vehement declaration made Harry pause in surprise.

"Well...you can't," Harry finally uttered. "Because...I'm up here..."

"Well said," Amaris interjected quietly. Harry glanced over his shoulder, seeing the small half-fae sitting on a desk and swinging her legs back and forth as she gazed over the classroom with expressionless eyes. Sometimes it was hard to tell when she was being sarcastic- or insincere, she still hadn't gotten the hang of sarcasm yet.

"As I was saying, before some rude bitch interrupted me..." Harry tried again, but was interrupted once more.

"Do you always have to swear, Harry?" Amanda sighed.

"There we go again," Harry snapped, jabbing his finger at Amanda. "Why don't you shut the hell up and let me..."

"Hey, she was only asking a question," one of the Sixth Year Gryffindors muttered, a tall, lithe girl with streaked blonde hair and an athletic figure- one of the Quidditch players. Harry recalled debating with himself whether or not to go and watch one of the Quidditch matches, just to see the three delectable chasers getting all sweaty.

"I..." Harry started.

"Just shut up and let him speak," somebody snapped from the back row, a Ravenclaw male. "You know how he gets when he starts throwing one of his tantrums..."

"Tantrums?" Harry repeated icily, but was largely ignored.

"Tantrums?" Amanda echoed, at almost the same time. She rounded on the boy. "Shut up, Michael! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I know what I see," Michael retorted.

Suddenly, the small group was rife with argument and noise. Harry saw Hermione try to calm everybody down, but it seemed as if tensions were running high and this was the tumbling block for it all. He saw more than a few hands going for their wands as he stood on the podium above them, before he had finally had enough and raised his wand.

"Bitchium Slapatius!" He roared, focusing his will and Hellfire into his wand. The air rippled and suddenly there were twenty-five cries of pain as an invisible force lashed out against everybody's cheek to deliver a wave of slaps across the face.

Everybody turned to him, identical expressions of outrage on their faces. Harry gave them a wintry smile, his wand twirling casually in his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice oozing with insincerity. "You know how I can get when I throw a tantrum," He saw the Ravenclaw boy flush and smiled, "Now, if you're all done having your tantrums, I'd kindly like for you to shut the hell up!"

The last words came out as a roar and many of them flinched as Harry's wand spewed out a wave of crackling sparks.

"I do have my tantrums," Harry mused, satisfied that he had captured the attention of everybody in the room. Even Amaris was looking interested as he watched on silently. "Like, there was this one time, when I had this tantrum- it was right after Voldemort kidnapped me," he smirked when he saw many of them flinch, "Yeah, he kidnapped me, murdered Krum and then resurrected himself into an avatar of pure darkness. I threw a massive tantrum then; I was just so pissed off at everything, so I just slaughtered my way through his servants, just killing them with the powerful spells I knew. Do you know how I managed to do that?"

Many of them shook their heads silently.

"Well, I remembered back when I was the student- when I was in your position- and I remembered what I did," Harry said softly. He gave the group a very pointed look. "I remember that I didn't talk when my teacher was telling me ways to save my life! I remember that I didn't interrupt the teacher as she tried to impart necessary survival skills! What I remember, is that I shut up, paid attention and did what I was fucking told!"

'Most of the time,' Meciél added.

"So, if you're all done bitching, kindly shut the hell up and listen," Harry finished. He gave them a sweet smile. "Any questions?"

Not a single student moved, and then Amanda slowly raised her hand. Harry turned his head and gazed down at her silently.

"Bitchium Slapatius?" Amanda repeated slowly, giving him a careful glance. "Is that...even a real spell?"

“No, I just made the words up. It’s my way of magically bitch-slapping people who are pissing me off,” Harry said dryly. “Any important questions, like ‘How can I give CPR to the person who just collapsed next to me?’ or ‘Is it the red wire of the blue wire?’ No? Good.”

He lowered his wand and placed it back in his robes.

“As I was saying,” he started. “You know a few spells, whoop-de-fucking-doo. You could know all of the spells from the beginning of time till right this very moment, and I could still guarantee that you’d get your arse kicked in a battle. Do you want to know why?”

They nodded.

“It’s because you have no idea how to fight,” Harry said, thumping his hand on his palm. “Sure, you can throw around all your spells and if you’re lucky, you might hit something. Might, just like I ‘might’ give you all a thousand galleons?”

“Really?” Ron asked obliviously.

“Weasley, you have met me before, right?” Harry asked scornfully. “We’re not just meeting for the first time here, are we? Because if we were, I could get how you would ask such a stupid question. No, of course I’m not giving you my money. I’m a cheap, spoiled bastard. You should know that by now.”

“Oh,” Ron said slowly.

“Do you want us to practice our aiming or something?” Amanda asked contemplatively.

“Sort of,” Harry said. “Back in the old days, when muggles thought that throwing rocks at each other was cool, ancient warlocks pretty much had a bitch-fest and decided to kill each other. They created a few battle-formations that might come in handy for you lot. You don’t have a lot of skill, but you do have numbers, and that’ll work for you. It requires teamwork, which is good for weaklings like yourself, and co-ordination, so you’ll need to practice a lot.”

"Wait a moment," Hermione said as the students around her muttered to each other in awe and anticipation. "I remember reading about this sort of thing. Didn't Warlock strategies become obsolete after apparition was discovered?"

"Yep," Harry said cheerfully. "It was a bit of a nasty surprise for them- I think it was the French who were on the receiving end. There they were, standing in their nice little formations, with their enemies just popping up and down the battlefield and breaking through their lines. It pretty much won England the war of 684 AD."

"How will it be useful to us now?" Hermione asked haughtily. "If you don't recall, we still have apparition."

"And if you don't recall, we also have something called anti-apparition wards," Harry snapped. "Like, this castle, the one you live in for most of the year- the one where you'll probably see fighting before you graduate."

"Hogwarts is safe!" one of the other students protested, looking unsettled.

"Right," Harry drawled sarcastically. "It's not like anybody's ever been, oh, stabbed, or something here."

Eyes flickered towards Amanda, who flushed but straightened her shoulders as determination washed over her face. Perhaps it was the reminder of just why she had wanted to become a more powerful witch or perhaps she was just as sick of the arguing students as Harry was, but she cut through the chatter with a curt tone.

"Alright, Harry, what do you need us to do?"

"Well," Harry started, assessing the students in front of him. "We'll work in blocks of six. Two crouch down with your wands extended. You'll be shielding, deflecting and blocking anything the enemy sends at you. Another two of you, stand a pace back, with your wands over their heads. You're the general spell-casters. Charms, jinxes, hexes, whatever you can throw at them, do it. The last two, stand a little behind the first line but duck in before the last. You're the ward-

breakers. If the enemy has a shield up, you smash it down with a shield-piercer or a heavy-powered spell. If you don't know any, Amanda can show you."

The students scurried as Harry barked orders at them, gesturing for them to move into position as he fed them instructions.

"Now, you guys need to be able to move quickly. I doubt any of you have the power or skill to block some of the more potent curses the Death Eaters might use, especially the killing curse. If one of them uses that, get the hell out of the way but stay together! And for the love of whatever pansy-god, don't let them surround you. Always have your back up to something- but make sure you have a way out. You don't want to box yourself in, especially if you're going to lose. Come on, hop to it!"

A/N: This has been on at DLP for a while, but I've been lazy. I've recently found Bleach, and got Call of Duty 4, Command and Conquer Three and Crysis for the PC. Thanks to oz and the others at DLP who addressed some issues I looked over and did the spelling and grammar.

The initial hubbub and excitement that had been the adventure to the Nevenever, the rescue of Maeve and Harry's daughter, Amaris, and the first few days of Amaris' stay at Hogwarts, slowly died down as the days turned to weeks, until the half-fae had spent almost a month in the large, stone castle. Slowly, the inhabitants became use to the small shadow that silently followed Harry around to his classes, her emerald eyes wide with a strange sense of detached interest to everything she saw. For Harry, he got quite good at ignoring his daughter's presence (although he had almost sat on her more than one) and was watching the end of the school year loom up with barely-hidden glee. Once his OWLs were done, he was out of this stupid school, with its stupid students, and back home.

Well, back to a home, at any rate. His old apartment had been completely destroyed when Voldemort had attacked him last year, and he still hadn't made alternate living arrangements. He'd lost a lot of money and luxury items when his home had gone up, but he shrugged them off easily enough. For the first couple of years after he had found Meciél, he had basically lived off what he could scab from bins and charity until his powers had grown to the point where he was able to utilise his magic for his own benefit.

'I do miss those silk sheets,' Meciél murmured, an almost longing tone in her voice. 'We Fallen have very few comforts, so it's only natural that some of us indulge in mortal vice. Me, personally, was always satisfied with a good bed and nice covers. It reminded me of better times.'

'They have silk up in heaven?' Harry thought in mild interest.

He was sitting at the Gryffindor table, at his normal spot right at the end. Sitting beside him was Amaris, looking quite disgruntled, Harry almost squashing her once again as he had went to sit down. It

wasn't his fault, she was so small and so bloody quiet all of the time that he almost forgot that she was here.

'Technically, heaven isn't 'up'. It's more to the side,' Meciél corrected, sounding amused. Her voice took on a sad, retrospective tone. 'And no, there was no silk. Heaven is not a place of matter, not even close to anything you could comprehend in your present mortal state.'

'It's something I'll never comprehend,' Harry thought darkly. 'If I die, I know exactly where I'm going. You know, consorting with the spawn of Hell and whatnot.'

'Quite true,' Meciél said offhandedly. 'The trick is for somebody like you- don't die.'

'I'm not planning on it,' Harry thought grimly. He returned back on the real world, absently shaking his head and focussing his eyes on his lunch.

"Were you conversing with your Fallen?" Amaris asked curiously. They were seated far enough from the rest of the table to talk in private, but Harry always cast a small localised charm around himself to block out unwanted eavesdropping.

"Yep," Harry said cheerfully, gazing down at his daughter.

She wore her sleek white dress and had somehow found a pair of sandals, although Harry wouldn't have a clue where she had gotten them from. However, and Harry didn't know if it was because she was growing or because she was in the 'mortal' world now, but her dark hair was as long as ever, almost reaching to her waist. It was also getting very scruffy, resembling her father's unkempt hair quite well, although it was not due to lack of trying. Of the odd behaviour that Harry had witnessed from his daughter, her almost fanatical-devotion to the upkeep of her hygiene and grooming was easily the most human behaviour she had every displayed.

Harry had nightmares of her bonding with those air-headed, boy-obsessed twits from Amanda's dorm. A fashion-conscious Amaris was the last thing he needed.

"May I inquire as to what you were talking about?" Amaris spoke up a few moments later, oblivious to her father's appraisal.

"You can," Harry started, with an arrogant tilt of his lips.

"...but you probably won't answer," Amaris recited, a flicker of frustration passing over her face. She rolled her eyes sullenly.

"Whoa, what was that?" Harry said, dropping his lunch. He stared at Amaris with delight. "Do that again!"

"Do what?" Amaris ventured cautiously. "I do not understand."

"You rolled your eyes," Harry said elatedly.

"Yes," Amaris answered simply. At Harry's pleased bark of laughter, a puzzled frown formed on her face. "I have observed this small action in use many times. It appears to denote a form of irritation, annoyance or sarcasm- although I am unsure as to how the third comes into play."

"See, only you could take a perfectly natural and common thing like rolling your eyes and make it seem so damn complicated," Harry grumbled, but the teasing glint in his eyes belied his tone.

Amaris tilted her head and appeared to consider the statement carefully.

"Thank you," she said at last.

"It wasn't a compliment," Harry muttered, but shook his head wryly.

'You have such a way with your daughter,' Meciell said as silence fell between the two family members.

'Yeah, yeah,' Harry grumbled. 'No need to be sarcastic.'

'I'm not,' Meciell said, and there was something in her voice that made Harry sit up and take notice- metaphorically speaking, of course.

‘What’s with you recently, Meciél?’ Harry asked curiously. ‘You’ve been a hell of a lot more quiet than usual. Where’s the old fire-and-brimstone Meciél? I’m not complaining, mind you, I like it when you’re like this...but you don’t, so I know there’s something wrong.’

‘A tale best left for later,’ Meciél said, with a degree of finality in her voice that made Harry sigh in annoyance. ‘Besides, you don’t have time. It looks like you two have company...’

“Malfoy,” Harry muttered, his senses only seconds behind Meciél’s advanced sensory processors in picking up the scent of the pale boys hair-gel- or whatever slimy crap he put in his hair.

His voice was loud enough to drift across, where Malfoy and his two burly friends/minions were strutting by, as if they were just merely heading for the doors. Ever since Harry had saved Malfoy’s skin (although he had been the one to put him in danger in the first place, but the platinum-blond didn’t know that), Malfoy had been unusually quiet towards Harry. Still, it had been only a matter of time before he had regained his older swagger.

Apparently he wasn’t aware that Harry could bring the debt up and order Malfoy to stay away from him forever. Not that he would, of course, it would be a waste of effort.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t a mudblood and her Potty” Malfoy sneered, drawing closer and casting a furtive glance up at the Head Table. None of the Professors had noticed anything yet, although by the time they had, Malfoy would already be walking out the door.

“Well?” Amaris spoke up softly, casting a curious gaze around them. “No, I’m afraid there are no artificial excavations used for withdrawing water in this hall. You must be mistaken?”

“What?” Malfoy snapped, looking confused. He exchanged glances with one of the burly boys by his side, who shrugged. “Does she think she’s funny?” he demanded at Harry.

“Nope,” Harry said with a shake of his head, for once, suppressing his anger and deciding to watch this one out. “She’s being utterly serious.”

“Perhaps you are inquiring to our welfare?” Amaris continued. She tilted her head at Malfoy. “I am well. Harry is well. Are you well?”

“Like I care about mudbloods and muggle-lovers,” Malfoy muttered sourly, but loud enough for Harry to hear him. The pale boy glanced at Harry, almost as if he had expected a reaction.

Considering that Harry was more racist than all of them combined, and his intolerance extended to pretty much everybody that was not him, they weren’t going to find very much.

“Then what is the purpose of the word ‘well’ in that repetitive statement?” Amaris inquired. “I do not understand. What does it mean, in this context? Should I concern myself with tense?”

“Um...” Malfoy uttered, looking uncertain. “It...means...” He struggled, then stopped and growled. “Shut up, you stupid little child!”

“I understand,” Amaris said softly. Her hollow eyes bored into Malfoy’s, who squirmed under the gaze, feeling distinctly uncomfortable for no apparent reason.

“Come on,” he muttered, his will to insult Harry fading. He jerked his head at the door. “Let’s go do our Transfiguration homework. You know how that hag gets.”

Harry watched as the trio of Slytherin’s left the hall.

“Not bad,” he conceded, stroking his chin. “Personally, I would have slammed his face down on the table until I had broken his nose, then yank at it real hard, but your way worked too.”

“Mudblood,” Amaris repeated softly, testing the word on her tongue. She had a contemplative look on her face, which dissolved into determination. “I do not like that mortal, father. May I go and kill him now?”

“What?” Harry asked, surprised. He scowled and rounded on his daughter fiercely, indignation burning in his eyes. “No! No daughter of mine will ever be convicted of murder!”

“I understand,” Amaris said dejectedly.

“You have to wait until it’s dark when nobody’s usually looking and then kill him,” Harry finished. “That way, you won’t get caught.”

“Ah,” Amaris said with dawning understanding. “I understand.”

“I’m sure you do,” Harry said dryly.

Amanda absently raked her hand through her long hair and sighed, eying her fellow members of the DA critically. Although most of her classmates were utilising the formations Harry had been showing them, some of them just couldn’t get into the habit of working in a team. It was with a note of pride that Amanda remembered how her team had come second in the competition they had held a few days ago. Since Harry had been competing, second place was practically a win, since nobody had expected to beat the sharp-tongued Gryffindor.

“No,” Amanda called out loudly, her voice tinged with exasperation. She moved forward, correcting the group of third year’s footwork, and stood back. “Do it again.”

The third years moved into position again, and at Amanda’s whistle, they moved at once as a group of second years threw a series of hexes and jinxes, flashes of light surging forward. However, the manoeuvre, which should have been an almost instantaneous side-step, failed and the third years stumbled as they all collapsed in a heap. A moment later, a series of startled yells and squeaks filled the air as they were hit by the second years spells.

“Okay, try it again,” Amanda said, rubbing her eyes and suppressing a groan.

There were times when she sometimes empathised with Harry and his lack of interest with those just not capable of learning what he considered 'basic spells and tactics'.

She supposed that made her a bad teacher.

Of course, with Harry, those not capable of learning was pretty much everybody except for her. A small smile of pride appeared on her face as she unconsciously straightened. Of all the people in the school, it was she that he passed on his formidable spell work to, she that received personalised training from one of the only people to have duelled the most powerful Dark Lord since...who knows when- even if Harry did take a perverse pleasure in knocking her around.

Sure, Amanda could take a few guesses as to why he trained her. Perhaps he wanted to corrupt her, start her on the road to dark magic. Perhaps he wanted an army, or loyal servants. Perhaps he was bored. Perhaps he was unconsciously seeking out the company of somebody familiar to him, of somebody who knew what he really was and didn't judge.

As much as she would have wished it, she doubted it was the latter.

Amanda knew that more than a few girls were quite jealous of her seemingly deep bond with the 'sarcastic, bad-tempered but undeniably attractive, little shit'. Even Amanda had to admit that Harry was more than a little easy on the eyes, although the knowledge that there was literally another person watching through him would put a damper on many of the thoughts the other girls had. He had an appeal, sure, Amanda could see that. His physical looks were only supplemented with his rebellious and cheeky attitude. But she had no doubt that every single girl who showed an interest in him would flee if they knew even half of what she did. Well, everybody except for herself.

She could tell that Harry wasn't all bad, no matter how much her brothers, sisters and mother protested. Her Dad was remarkably silent; although Harry was know one of the Knights, so perhaps it was professional courtesy. As much as Harry postured and groaned and moaned, there was something deep within him that refused to die, no

matter what darkness that Fallen poured into him. It was the same something that made Harry save her life, the same something that made Harry save her family, the same something that made Harry come here and tutor students instead of...doing whatever it was he did when she wasn't around.

He wasn't all evil. She just knew it.

Amanda was broken from her thoughts when the door to the Room of Requirement slammed open. She whirled around and dread seized her heart as Umbridge strolled in, flanked by her goons in the Inquisitorial Squad. A simpering smile stretched across the Defence Professor's face- an expression that Amanda wanted to blast it with that curse Harry showed her the other day- and Umbridge glanced around, shaking her head mournfully.

"Now, now," she tutted loudly. "Naughty children breaking Ministry Decrees. This simply will not do."

The DA was silent, many of them with expressions of defeat on their faces. The group of third years that Amanda had been helping looked like they had been frozen to the floor. As Umbridge strode forward, her eyes caught something hanging on the wall and widened. She flicked her wand and summoned the piece of parchment too her hands, disbelief and excitement flaring in her eyes.

"Well, well, well, it looks as if it isn't just the children who have been naughty," she breathed. "Dumbledore's Army, are you?"

Amanda, with a sinking feeling in her chest, suddenly knew this was not going to play out well.

As Professor Umbridge raided the illegal student group known as the D.A, Harry and Amaris were outside, strolling by the lake. The sun was just setting, casting a beautiful glow over the shimmering water, and the first of the stars were just starting to twinkle in the sky. It seemed as if it was another touching moment between father and daughter.

“Are you sure?” Harry asked irritably, casting an annoyed glare at the setting sun. He looked anything but appreciative of the beauty before him. “Fuck, that glare’s annoying.”

“I am quite certain,” Amaris said calmly, her eyes peering into the murky depths of the shimmering lake. She tilted her head and regarded her father with faint surprise. “And do you not find all of this beautiful?”

“Beautiful?”

“I was led to believe that mortals have a keen interest and attraction towards moments of natural beauty,” Amaris said. She paused, turned her head back to the lake and lifted her arm. “The disturbance is coming from there.”

“Could be a pissed off merman,” Harry muttered, withdrawing his wand and striding forward. “And no, I don’t find the setting sun and all that crap to be cool. The sun sets all of the time. It’s nothing special to look at.”

“We Fae appreciate beauty,” Amaris said quietly. She gazed at the rapidly-darkening sky that shrouded the snow-tipped mountains on the horizon. “I have heard Sidhe say that the mortal world is far more beautiful than our own. Usually, it is in conjunction with the devastating effects mortal technology is having on the planet. Scenes of unsurpassed beauty are being destroyed by filthy, iron-built technology.”

“What are you, a hippie? Nobody- especially not me- gives a crap about nature, the environment and all that crap,” Harry snapped irritably. Amaris was silent, but radiated disapproval, as Harry knelt down and jabbed the tip of the lake with his wand.

“Well, it’s not a merman,” he concluded a moment later. “I can’t sense...” He broke off, a frown appearing on his face. A moment later, his eyes widened and he jumped up, taking a quick step backwards and raising his wand. Amaris stiffened, fae magic pooling in her hand as Harry opened his mouth, a dark fury pouring into his eyes in the form of a flickering, fiery light.

“Denarians,” Harry hissed with sudden realisation.

At the same moment, the surface of the lake exploded in a wave of water and fire, the tranquillity of the scene blasted away. Geysers of water rocketed up into the air, steam hissing and spluttering as lances of blinding-white fire roared forward. The ground rumbled as, rising from the bottom of the lake, three ancient beasts emerged from the steam. There was one resembling a lion, with large jagged claws, whiskers that were almost three metres long and a tail that curled up into a sharp blade. The other resembled some sort of canine creature, billows of smoke pouring out of its mouth and its odd blue-coloured fur dripping with water. The other was a strange feminine humanoid-figure, its limbs long and disjointed. It had no mouth, four long, pale fingers and a rubbery-grey elastic-like skin.

All of the beasts had an extra set of glowing eyes, and above those eyes burned a glowing sigil- the mark of the Fallen that inhabited those hosts. Harry got a brief glimpse of each symbol as the Fallen beasts surged forward through the water with triumphant cries of anger.

‘Belphegor, Berith and Marchosias,’ Meciél hissed into his mind. ‘Belphegor and Berith have long been driven mad by the Void. Marchosias must be supervising and directing them!’

“Vorago Aquilus Exussum!” Harry roared, using the distance between he and the Denarians to his advantage and summoning one of his most powerful- and time-consuming, spells. At the same time, he roughly shoved Amaris to the side.

The ground shuddered and the giant bubbles lifted to the surface of the lake, popping loudly and spraying water through the air as the sand beneath the water gave way. Steam hissed and spluttered, filling the air with a hazy fog as fire roared beneath the water, a bright red glow that was visible even from the surface as Harry pumped Hellfire and power into the spell. The water rippled and the Denarians were pulled under as fierce winds shot beneath the waves, creating a series of powerful currents that led directly to the chasm of steam and

heat. Harry glared at the surface of the lake as he held his wand aloft, Hellfire roaring from the Void and into his wand.

‘Any advice?’ Harry thought, a bloodthirsty grin crossing his face. He unconsciously clenched his fingers, gripping his wand tightly.

‘The Choimbera- the lion- is vulnerable to heat,’ Meciél told him urgently. ‘The canine has the advantage of great speeds, but loses manoeuvrability once it gains momentum. The humanoid being is Marchosias. It is more frail and weak than a human child, but its mental abilities are enhanced greatly by his demonic form. Do not make eye contact and ignore any strange sounds you might hear. I will shield you as best I can.’

“This’ll be fun,” Harry muttered grimly, lowering his wand as his spell finally came to an end. The bright smile on his face belied his sarcastic words.

He peered at the water carefully, seeing nothing but residual ripples and hearing nothing but silence. He noticed movement out of the corner of his eyes and frowned. “Get out of here, Amaris.”

“I am battle-ready, father,” Amaris said calmly, although her face did seem to be more pale than usual. She raised her hands and gathered pools of emerald light, flecked with gold and crimson. “I may be of assistance.”

“Yeah, you’ll assist in me getting my head chopped off when Maeve finds out that her daughter was killed,” Harry snapped fiercely. “I don’t give a shit if you think you’re a fucking Drakon, when I tell you to get the fuck out of here, then-“

He was interrupted as the lake, which had gone calm, exploded with movement once more. The creatures lurched out of the water, Belphegor – the choimeria- looking badly singed but the other two seeming relatively fine. Marchosias, the tall, humanoid, drifted back as Belphegor and the wolf-like form of Berith charged forward with great speeds. Berith let out a series of cackling yelps, his eyes consumed with an ancient and bestial madness that had stripped his sanity ages past.

“Pungo Plerusque!” Harry growled.

The tip of his wand flared with bright light and waves of thin and small streaks of pinkish-red light shot forward by the dozens. Belphegor dodged, his strong legs allowing him to jump as far as six metres away. Berith kept surging forward, zipping past the rapid-pace of sizzling bolts at first. Harry directed his wand to the left and Berith was struck in the face by no less than twenty different streaks of pink light, which emitted a small flash as they disappeared in a shower of white sparks, that jumped and crackled over the canine-like’s skin.

The spell wasn’t particularly dangerous, at best, Berith would have a few bruises, but the charge was broken and Harry advanced, his wand sweeping up before him. Fire blazed from the tip, reflected in the eyes of its conjurer, and lashed out at Berith once more, cracking on his back and flinging him backwards toward the lakeshore. Harry didn’t wait to see what happened, swinging around with a nasty grin on his face.

“Avada Kedavra!” He bellowed triumphantly.

A powerful blast of green light discharged from the end of his wand with enough force to make Harry’s arm buckle. Invisible winds howled with dark power as it surged forward in half a heartbeat, lancing out at Belphegor, who had been charging for him after his jump. The Denarian’s reflexes were almost on par with Harry’s, apparently, for it dove the side in a long, graceful jump and snarled. Its snarl turned into a yelp when it took a step forward and slipped, crashing down on the suddenly slick and icy ground in an undignified heap.

Amaris strode forward, her face calm but her eyes merely pools of emerald light. She lifted her hand, faerie magic glittering around her tiny form, and a ball of solid ice formed in her palm. She hefted it at Belphegor, who was struck straight in the face; the force of the blow sending him sprawling backwards with a loud, cat-like screech.

‘Didn’t I tell her to go away?’ Harry thought, batting away Berith with a bolt of sparkling blue coils of energy. Bolts of magic zapped around

his frame, singing hair, but the Denarian was quick and bolted from his landing spot to avoid a sickly-green curse from Harry's wand.

'Like father, like daughter,' Meciél said absently.

Harry could feel a pressure at the back of his mind, an intrusive, alien sensation battering away at the delicate system of nerves and cells of his brain. It was only his skills in mental defences and Meciél's help that kept Marchosias from crushing his mind like a bug.

"Corium Ustulo!" Harry hissed, jabbing his wand at Marchosias and smiling in satisfaction as a cone of dim orange light blasted forward.

An instant later, he whirled around, his wand flying above his head as sent a large tremor through the ground, making Berith, who was surging forward, stumble. With a quick thought, his robes were ripped in two, and wings of ashen bone shot from his back. He met Berith's charge with quick, slashing movements of his wings, spinning around and delivering a furious jab to the beast's stomach, while simultaneously raising his wand and sending a vicious curse at Belphegor.

Marchosias threw his bony hands out in front of him, he dispelled the dim-orange curse. He cocked his alien-like head and raised his spindly arms, wrapping his hands around an invisible ball of pure kinetic-energy. He launched it at Harry, and a moment later the ground cracked and a giant slab of rock was thrown forward along with it.

As Harry batted Berith away, his enhanced reflexes and perception skills were at their maximum as he dodged, ducked and deflected swipes that would have felled trees and bites that could take a chunk from a car, his second curse lanced through the air, exploding in a cascading wave of silver energy on Belphegor's back. The lion-like creature roared in agony, temporarily halting its advance on a rapidly-retreating Amaris, whose eyes were just beginning to stir with true fear. She took the chance to raise her arms, her face twisted in concentration as snow and ice whipped up and elongated into spears of jagged frost. She hurled them at Belphegor with a flick of her wrist,

but the Denarian opened his mouth and let out a terrible blast of pure sonic energy, and the icicles shattered into dozens of tiny pieces.

Harry, after finally delivering a vicious hellfire-enhanced kick to Berith's exposed ribs and sending him sprawling away, whirled around and conjured a hasty dome of sparkling crimson hues to surround and solidify around him. The large chunk of stone smashed against the cylinder of energy around him and bounced off, landing on the ground with a small shudder. The ball of pure kinetic energy, however, struck his shield and detonated. Harry grunted as he was blasted aside, shield and all, and fell sprawling to the ground. An instant later, he used his wings to push himself back up and glared at Marchosias with hate-filled eyes.

This wasn't over yet.

"As I see it, I am afraid that you have very little to pin on me, Cornelius," Dumbledore said quietly. There was an edge to his light-blue eyes as he peered over his half-moon glasses, staring down at Fudge, Umbridge and the three Aurors that had accompanied them.

Amanda, who was being clasped by Umbridge, was silent as she watched the proceedings with wide eyes, icy-cold dread draining down into the pit of her stomach. She had been identified as the 'ringleader' of the DA, and, as such, had been called into Dumbledore's office so that the Minister could decide her fate.

"Nothing?" Fudge spluttered, the bowlers hat threatening to topple off his head. His cheeks were red as he waved a scrunched-up scroll of parchment under Dumbledore's nose. "I have this! Evidence of an illegal student club learning prohibited spells...no," he said, calming himself down and staring at Dumbledore with hatred mingled with disgust. "No, this was a student militia, training themselves for battle under your name!"

"A student club that, until tonight, I was quite unaware of," Dumbledore remarked quietly. "Perhaps the name was merely meant to mock your undersecretary's teaching practises. I daresay, her belief that I am forming an uprising against the Ministry of Magic is

one of her greatest secrets, so it is only natural that all of Hogwarts knows.”

Amanda was barely paying attention, wondering desperately what she should do. Would they expel her? She hoped not. Between Hogwarts and Salem, it wasn't hard for her to pick which school she liked the most. Salem was alright, but Hogwarts...Hogwarts was alive, full of life and emotion. Every day was a chance to learn something new, whether it was a spell from charms or if it was something simple, like how the wall at the end of the second corridor was only a door every quarter of an hour, and trying to walk through it at any other time would give you bruises.

She wondered what Harry would do in her position, and then had to stop herself from snorting out loud. Yeah, that wasn't a scenario hard to predict. Fudge would yell, Umbridge would screech, Harry would take out his wand and burn down the school. She had to suppress another giggle, and some part of her mind wondered if she was becoming hysterical. After all, it was only expulsion. There were other schools.

A sudden thought occurred to her, and it left her cold and clammy. What if she wasn't expelled, but arrested? She had technically broken a Ministry decree, a Ministry law. Would that be enough to have her thrown in Azkaban? She shuddered and suddenly her hysteria was gone, replaced with a dark sense of foreboding. What was going to happen to her?

“Dumbledore's army. Dumbledore's army!” Umbridge was shouting, when Amanda refocussed her attention.

The flabby witch's fingers were tightening on Amanda's arm and she winced, pain flashing across her face. She missed Dumbledore's tightening features as he sat behind his desk, looking entirely unperturbed, even though there were three Aurors surrounding him, their wands drawn.

“I'm afraid, Madame Umbridge, that my last 'army' disbanded shortly after I defeated the dark wizard Grindelwald,” Dumbledore said quietly. His eyes twinkled behind his glasses and his eyes rested

upon Amanda. "Although, I must admit, I am quite flattered, Ms. Carpenter, even if your actions were unwise, given the current political situation."

"Don't lie!" Umbridge shrieked, her eyes lighting up with a maddened frenzy of fanaticism and fury. Her nails bit into Amanda's skin, but the Professor ignored the blonde girl's cry of pain as she continued screeching. "We know that you have been forming an army to overthrow the Ministry! We know that you want to become Minister of Magic! We know that..."

As soon as Amanda's cry had hit his ears, Dumbledore had rose up and, to the occupants of his office, suddenly appeared twice as tall. The lights dimmed and became the darkest of shadows, an aura of discernible power seeped off him and his eyes flashed with sudden fury as he stared down at Umbridge coldly.

"Unhand my student at once," he said quietly, but his voice seemed to reverberate around the office in a terrible echo of power that left dread in the hearts of all those that heard it.

Amanda felt Umbridge tremble with fear as the witch quickly loosened her grip, and she snatched her arm back, cradling it to her chest as she gazed up at Dumbledore. The three Aurors around him were visibly shaken, their wands tightly gripped, and they looked like they were about to bring down the Headmaster at any moment.

Suddenly, as quick as his anger had appeared, it was gone. Dumbledore remained standing, his ever-present gentleness and humour gone as he stared down at Fudge and Umbridge with a quiet intensity that kept the Minister of Magic of the whole British Ministry of Magic silent.

"Were it my goal to become Minister of Magic, I would have done so long before you ever rose to power, Minister," Dumbledore said quietly. "And consider this, Madame Umbridge. Were it my goal to overthrow the Ministry, and should I choose to lead an uprising against you, I would not need an army to emerge victorious. I would breach the Ministry in a matter of seconds. Auror after Auror could throw themselves in my path to no avail, for I would dispatch them in

mere moments. There would be no place for you to hide, for I would always be able to find you. In the end, you would fall, regardless of whether there was an army behind me or not.”

Fudge had paled and was fidgeting with the hem of his lime-green robes. He swallowed nervously, looking a lot more uncertain than he had been before. In contrast, Umbridge’s face was so red that Amanda wouldn’t be surprised if she literally exploded where she stood. However, even she couldn’t help but feel a little humbled- and terrified- of Dumbledore’s speech, especially the way the powerful wizard just radiated a sense of truth. She had no doubt that if he tried to do what he had planned, he would succeed, with only a few wizards who could possibly oppose him- Voldemort and Harry being the topmost.

“Are you- Are you threatening me?” Fudge asked hoarsely, gesturing at the Aurors. All three were looking distinctly nervous, especially with the way Dumbledore glanced over them, assessing them and not even considering them a threat.

“No, Cornelius,” Dumbledore answered and suddenly everything was back to normal. The light returned, Dumbledore’s quiet intensity disappeared and he suddenly looked very old. “It has not come to that, not yet. There is still a chance for you to make things right, to prepare for what we know is inevitable.”

“I will not have this discussion with you again,” Fudge snapped loudly, putting on a show of confidence. “You’re right, though. According to the letter of the law, the evidence against you is circumstantial, at best. However,” he turned to Amanda, a grim look on his face. “You, Ms Carpenter, are found guilty of breaking numerous educational decrees, and as such, I hereby expel you from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You will hand over your wand, where it will be promptly snapped, and...”

“Perhaps you misunderstood me,” Dumbledore interjected quietly and Fudge stopped, blinking and turning to Dumbledore in confusion.

Amanda found her gaze locked onto Dumbledore, who was staring at her intently. His eyes bore into her own, and although she squirmed,

she suddenly found that she didn't have the willpower to turn away. After a few seconds, Dumbledore nodded to himself, apparently reaching a decision of some kind.

"What are you talking about, Dumbledore?" Fudge said irritably.

"I was merely remarking that you had a flimsy case, Cornelius," Dumbledore said quietly. "That does not make your claims any less true, though."

"What?" Fudge asked, staring at Dumbledore incomprehensively, his look mirrored by Amanda's.

"You are right," Dumbledore said, and there was an air of cheerfulness around him as he continued. "Alas, I convinced Ms. Carpenter here to form the club as the basis for my army. She was convinced that this was merely a way for her classmates to pass their OWLs and had no idea of my true motivations."

"What?" Fudge asked again, staring at Dumbledore in shock. Slowly, a smile of greed appeared over his face. "Is...this a confession, Albus?"

"I believe it is," Dumbledore remarked cheerfully, much to Amanda's horror. "I am the one responsible for breaking your Ministry decrees, Cornelius. It is I who am at fault here, not the students. You have caught me in the act. Case closed, as they would say."

"Then you- you have been plotting against?" Fudge asked slowly. "You- you admit to raising an army to subvert the legitimate rule of the Ministry of Magic?"

"That's right," Dumbledore admitted, nodding. "Would you prefer a written confession instead?"

Suddenly, Amanda knew what he was trying to do and she opened her mouth to protest, when the strangest sensation came over her. Something made her close her mouth with a snap and she kept her silence as Dumbledore's defeat played out around her.

"This is excellent," Fudge breathed, then let out a roaring laugh, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "This is just prefect. Dawlish, Shackelbolt, Proudfoot, bind Dumbledore and take him back to.."

"Ah, may I interject once again?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" Fudge asked impatiently.

"I believe there has been a misunderstanding," Dumbledore said.

"A...misunderstanding," Fudge repeated, his brows furrowed.

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded. "You seem to be under the impression that I would- what is the term? Ah, yes, come quietly."

Fudge stared at him, looking like Dumbledore had just swept the world from beneath his feet, while Amanda internally crowed in victory, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. Dumbledore, for his part, continued to look relaxed, even as the Aurors around him tensed.

"Now, Dumbledore," Fudge said nervously. "You are surrounded by three of the best Aurors the Ministry has. Lets not do anything foolish here."

"I'm afraid your best just isn't quite good enough," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "With no offence intended," he added, nodding at the Aurors. "Yes, you could throw me in Azkaban, but that island was not designed for wizards of my...calibre. Quite frankly, it would not hold me."

"Just what..." Fudge started, then jumped in fright when one of the strange silver instruments on Dumbledore's bookshelves suddenly let out a loud gong.

Dumbledore looked up sharply, his eyes widening behind his glasses. A puff of smoke arose from the spindly device and Dumbledore strode across the room, brushing past the Aurors without a thought.

“Where?” he asked crisply. The device clanked and hummed, letting out another puff of smoke. Dumbledore frowned. “There are three? Who is there?”

The device shuddered and groaned, then fell silent as an eerie silver mist arose from it, forming itself into the shape of a sigil that Amanda found exasperatingly familiar, before it split off into two. Dumbledore’s face darkened and he whirled around.

“I’m afraid I must cut our time short here, Cornelius,” he said quietly. “Pressing business requires my immediate attention.”

“Now, just wait one minute!” Fudge bellowed angrily. “Aurors! Restrain him!”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said ominously, and his wand was suddenly in his hand. He raised it as the Aurors shouted out incantations and sent a hail of spells at him, but he merely brushed them aside as easily as batting away a fly.

“Get him!” Fudge roared.

Dumbledore raised his wand and the office was suddenly filled with a brilliant white light, painful in its intensity, accompanied moments later by a deafening bang. Amanda clutched her ears and fell to the ground. She may have been screaming, but she couldn’t tell as a shrill whine burst into her head, until she felt like she was going to explode with all of the sensations she was feeling.

The light dimmed but Amanda remained on the floor, her eyes clenched shut and her hands over her ears. She jerked in fear when somebody grasped her gently by the shoulders and stood her up, and opened her eyes in fear.

“Ms Carpenter,” Dumbledore said urgently. “Look at me, please.”

Amanda gazed up at him, struggling to throw off the after-effects of the spell. Distantly, she was aware that all three Aurors, as well as Fudge and Umbridge, were lying motionless on the floor.

"Ms Carpenter, you must not abandon Harry," Dumbledore urged intently.

Amanda frowned, trying to open her mouth to tell him that she would never do that, never betray the wizard that had saved her life and shown her a path to becoming a great witch; never.

"He needs somebody to negate his hostile tendencies," Dumbledore continued, and smiled wryly. "I am not that somebody, but you are."

Amanda wanted to argue with him. Harry didn't listen to her; he didn't respect her opinion like that. He tolerated her; that was the feeling she got, although she did like to think that he thought of her as his friend.

"Harry Potter has fallen to darkness," Dumbledore whispered and he peered into Amanda's eyes. "He must not fall to evil. Do you understand me?"

Amanda's tongue was working in her mouth now and she opened her mouth, her voice croaky and soft.

"I-I think so," she responded quietly.

"Good," Dumbledore uttered. He let go of her shoulders and took a step backwards. "Persevere, Ms Carpenter, and farewell."

There was a flash of light a hauntingly beautiful melody and a blur of crimson and golden light, as the air exploded with fire. Amanda caught a glimpse of something diving for Dumbledore, before the older wizard disappeared in a burst of fire, leaving her alone in the Headmaster's office with five unconscious people.

"Come on, is that it?" Harry jeered loudly, battle-lust surging through his veins. A dark smile had crossed his face and adrenaline and hellfire rushed through his body, bringing him to a unique high he ever so craved. "Is that the best you have, Belphegor? Is that the best the mighty ram of the east can muster?"

Belphegor, still in his demonic tiger-like form, roared with fury as Harry's word penetrated his maddened mind and stoked the flames of rage that fuelled him on. Still, his body was rife with dark scorches and wounds, splotches of bluish blood dripping to the ground and sizzling into nothingness. His companion, kin in similar demonic forms and in madness, was bound in an icicle of fae power as Amaris clenched her fists, her very being straining to hold the struggling Denarian in place.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry roared, an eerie jet of deathly green light blasting forward and lancing out at the trapped Denarian.

At the same time, Marchosias, who was hovering above the water and looking distinctly annoyed as he dispelled the last of the searing flames that surrounded him, threw out his hands. A ripple of telekinetic energy shot at Berith, and the canine-demon yelped in agony as the blow shattered the ice that had surrounded him and threw him into a nearby tree. A second later, Harry's curse flew by, struck the ground and exploded in a shower of dirt and green flame.

"Why won't you die?" Harry snarled, turning his wand back towards Marchosias and elongating the sharp, bony wings from his back.

As he whipped his wand up, summoning his powerful fiendfyre in a blazing flock of crows, he lashed out backwards with his wings and struck at the struggling and weakened Belphegor. Belphegor let out a roar of agony as Harry stabbed past his already-weakened protections and into vulnerable flesh. As cursed flame rushed at Marchosias, who lifted his hands and pulled the water up from beneath him in the visage of a watery shark, Harry lifted Belphegor up with his wings and, with a triumphant laugh, threw him at Berith with great force. Berith, who had just jumped back up from his impact with the tree, was struck with his companions wounded and bloodied demonic form, and they both bounced along the ground in a series of yelps and whines.

Amaris, panting, slowly limped up to Harry's side as his cursed fire struck the watery shark and engulfed it. However, the spell was weakened enough that Marchosias dispelled the rest of it with a near-invisible dome of mental power. Harry snarled at him wordlessly. The

other Fallen was significantly powerful, although not a match the top three Denarians of that era, Nicodemus, Vesper and Harry- though Nicodemus was dead. Still, he would put up quite a fight before he was taken down. He might even get lucky, and Harry knew that luck was far more powerful than any spell he could conjure.

He should know, he had received its boon more often than not.

"No!" Harry heard in his mind, and winced at the strength of the telepathic projection. "Do not transform!"

Harry glanced back at Belphegor and Berith, noticing that the former was quickly transforming back into his normal human form, the wounds on his demonic form too great for him to struggle on any longer. Paws shrunk, tails disappeared and whiskers became a long beard as the lion-like creature became a large, burly human, rippling with muscle and scar. Harry sent a powerful piercing curse at Marchosias, and then turned his wand upon the newly transformed human, preparing to finish him off.

Suddenly, something filled the air and the man screamed, madness mingled in with agony. There was a glittery glow that surrounded him, suspending him in the air as invisible powers played across his body in a cascading symphony of chimes. With a loud pop, the man was hurled across the grass and back into the lake- almost thirty metres. He landed in the water with a splash and disappeared underneath the dark surface.

Marchosias hissed at him, his alien face reflecting the sheer fury he was feeling, but with a curt gesture at Berith, the other insane Denarian was lifted off his feet and also thrown into the water- this time by Marchosias' mental control. Harry sent a powerful flash of destructive sapphire light, but Marchosias submerged and didn't return. The spell struck the water and exploded in a deafening boom, an enormous geyser of water rising up from the surface of the lake. It died down and the lake was suddenly silent, save for Harry's harsh breathing and Amaris' almost-unnoticeable gasps of pain.

There was a flash of light and Harry whirled around, his eyes glinting with a fiery tinge, only to see Dumbledore stepping out from

apparently nowhere, Fawkes perched on his shoulder. The phoenix spread out its splendid crimson and golden plumage and let out a trill as Dumbledore took a step forward, his eyes sweeping over Harry and Amaris and assessing the surroundings. He looked furious, his wand held aloft and his face pale, ready to destroy Harry's, or, by extension, his enemies.

"They're gone," Harry said dryly, his wand still clasped in his hand. He gestured at the lake. "They went out the same way they came in."

"It should not be possible," Dumbledore said, lowering his wand and walking forward. His overly-large purple robes flapped out behind him in the gentle breeze. The sun had almost gone down by now, the darkness revealing a faint and reassuring aura of power that clung to Dumbledore like a cloak.

"Tell that to Marchosias," Harry muttered sardonically. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow and he elaborated. "One of Vesper's bitches. Medium-level Denarian. He had two crazies with him as well."

"The wards should have kept them out," Dumbledore said quietly, an intense look of concentration on his face. "I must have erred. This is most worrisome. If Hogwarts is vulnerable to Denarian attack, then the students- and you- are not safe."

"The wards," Harry said, his eyes narrowing as he pondered something. Meciell agreed with him, so he continued. "They came here in their demonic forms, but when one of them transformed back to humans, something lifted him up and threw him into the lake."

"They arrived as demons," Dumbledore repeated, and his eyes twinkled with sudden knowledge. "Ah, yes, I see now. That was most ingenious of them, especially by using the lake."

"Whatever," Harry said airily, waving it off. "You can make it that they can't come back, right?"

"Yes," Dumbledore answered. He went still, barely swaying on his feet as the cold breeze brushed against him. On his shoulder, Fawkes trilled, and Harry gave the phoenix a dirty look.

How he hated that stupid bird.

From the corner of his eye, he noted that Amaris was glaring at Fawkes with an unrivalled display of disdain and hatred, despite her lingering wounds, and he smiled. It seemed as if it was a genetic trait then. He did frown when he saw Amaris' obvious tiredness, and gruffly clearing his throat, he put a hand on her shoulder and supported her as she slumped against him.

"There we are," Dumbledore said a moment later, opening his eyes and slumping down a little.

He lifted his wand, and, with a broad flourish, the few fires, debris and smoke lingering after the battle disappeared. Another wave saw the ground become whole and flat again, the craters and scorch marks removed. A third wave saw no visible effect, but Harry recognised the spell as an advanced magical-eraser, used for removing spell residue and distorting standard magical analysis charms.

"This is all I can do for you now," said Dumbledore heavily, once he was done. He looked tired and beaten, and Fawkes crooned a tune on his shoulder. Both Harry and Amaris shuddered, but Harry shrugged it off.

"Something happened," he deduced. "Something that wasn't part of your plan."

"I have been removed from my post as Headmaster," Dumbledore said heavily. "As of now, I am a fugitive- much like your godfather, as we are both innocent of what we have been accused of, although I suppose I could be considered guilty of aiding and abetting."

"What?" Harry asked in shock. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm afraid that the organisation known as 'Dumbledore's Army' came to the attention of Professor Umbridge," Dumbledore explained. "Naturally, she informed the Minister, and here I am."

"Dumbledore's Army?" Harry repeated in confusion.

'The DA,' Meciell filled in, and Harry groaned.

"The DA...is Dumbledore's army?" Harry asked, and he shook his head in despair. "Are they fucking retarded or something? Why the hell would they-?"

"Not now, Harry," Dumbledore cut in firmly. "Now is not the time to be allocating guilt. We must accept what has happened and move on. I made my decision to protect my students from the Minister, and in doing so, I accepted the consequences of my actions."

"You took the rap for it," Harry concluded a moment later. He rubbed his eyes and groaned. "Why the hell would you do that? You should have stood back and let Fudge do whatever the hell he wanted!"

"Had Minister Fudge not proposed expulsion, I would have," Dumbledore admitted. "Had Ms Carpenter merely been given detentions, or had certain privileges revoked, I would have allowed Professor Umbridge to administer her 'justice'. However, when it became clear that they intended to snap Amanda's wand, I found that I had no choice but to intervene."

"She could always get a new wand," Harry muttered in exasperation. Amanda shifted against him and shifted on his feet to accommodate her weight. "She could have even gone back to Salem. Why would you do this for her?"

Dumbledore didn't say anything, but he raised his wand again. This time, he pointed it at Amaris. A soft, golden light spilled from the tip and wrapped itself around the smaller girl's wounds. When it disappeared, Amaris was looking much better, the bloodied cut on her head gone. Amaris touched her forehead gingerly, and then tilted her head as she regarded Dumbledore with surprise.

"I thank you," she said quietly.

"You're welcome, Miss Potter," Dumbledore responded calmly. He tucked his wand into his robes, while Harry winced at the name.

"Weird," he muttered, as Amaris leaned away from him, capable of standing on her own power now.

"I must leave now," Dumbledore said quietly. "The Minister will awaken soon and it would be wise if I were not here for them to find me."

"You could take them," Harry declared flatly.

"Ah, but I do not wish to take them," Dumbledore said. "Intent, Harry, can be more potent than the magic we wield."

"What does that even mean?" Harry muttered to himself.

"Do you remember your promise, Harry?" Dumbledore asked quietly. "How you swore to me that you would protect the students should I be forced from Hogwarts against my will?"

"Well, yeah," Harry said suspiciously. "But I don't know what I can do against Umbridge, without killing her. You know, I could always kill her."

"It is not Umbridge I am concerned about," Dumbledore said. "Once I leave, the school will be significantly more vulnerable. Should Lord Voldemort attack, there would be few who would be able to delay his progress."

"Oh," Harry said. "Protect them against Voldemort. Gotcha. Dark Lords, I can handle."

Something occurred to him at that moment and he groaned, heaving a great sigh. "If you leave now, then that bitch will take your place, and I'll be in deep shit. She'll expel me. I like my head where it is and I don't fancy living the rest of my life running from the White Council."

"It will not come to that," Dumbledore said firmly. "I have ensured that you will not be expelled or overtly targeted until you have completed your owls."

"How?"

“The White Council is not the only body to see the OWLs as a rite of passage into becoming a fully-fledged wizard,” Dumbledore answered. He absently stroked Fawkes as he continued. “As a witch or wizard passes their OWLs, in many ways they take a big step into becoming an adult member of society. As such, they are given more rights and more responsibilities, and the restrictions that are placed on them are lifted. Conversely, it is these restrictions that also protect them,” he paused. “No, Harry, Umbridge will not make any overt move against you until you have completed your OWLs. I suggest you leave Hogwarts as quickly and as quietly as possible after your exams.”

“Ah,” Harry uttered. He scratched his head, suddenly feeling tired as the last vestiges of Hellfire and adrenaline left his system. “You know, you could have just said ‘because I said so,’. Sure, I’d be annoyed, but I’d rather be annoyed than bored.”

“I see your sense of humour remains unaffected,” Dumbledore noted, taking one of Fawkes’ tail feathers. The beautiful bird was staring down at Amaris with her beady black eyes, and the little girl was staring right back at it solemnly. “We will meet shortly, Harry. For now, I wish you the best on your exams.”

“Good luck,” Harry said with grudging honesty.

Dumbledore inclined his head and disappeared in a puff of flame, leaving Harry and Amaris standing alone by the darkened lake. Harry turned to the water, peering forward and trying to see if any of the Denarians would resurface. Given that Dumbledore had apparently fixed the wards, he wasn’t expecting them to.

Pity. It had been a good fight while it had lasted.

“You know, I kinda like that guy,” Harry mused out loud.

“I despise his companion,” Amaris said softly, her voice emotionless.

“Yeah, I hate Fawkes as well,” Harry chuckled. He frowned. “Although, I’m more pissed off at the Denarians at the moment. Damn, I wish I had hit them with something a little more permanent.”

“Do not despair, father,” Amaris said, and there was a note of pride in her voice. “I was able to infect the canine-like creature with a Winter curse. In a few hours, they will experience the sudden loss of one of their feet.”

“What?”

“It will fall off,” Amaris explained.

“You sneaky little bitch!” Harry exclaimed, a grim smile curving his lips. He thumped her affectionately on the shoulder.

Amaris, her face mostly hidden by her hair, let her normally expressionless face twist up with a shy smile. Harry smiled down at her, then frowned and gazed over the lake. The sun had disappeared over the horizon and the stars were out in full force, twinkling above them.

“You know, if I believed in destiny, I’d say that everything was falling into place,” Harry said absently. “I’d say that the pieces were set and something big was going to go down really soon.”

“You don’t believe in pre-ordained events?” Amaris asked curiously.

“Nope,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“What if you are right and there is another attack?” Amaris inquired. She rubbed her head gingerly, and then flicked her fingers. Her dress rippled and the tears instantly mended, whilst the dried blood was removed from her skin. “What will you do if this occurs again?”

“The same as usual,” Harry said, with a dangerous smile. “Try to kill the little son’s of bitches before they kill me. It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there, Amaris, where the bigger dog always wins. Do you know what the moral is?”

“Be of larger size than the opposing canine?” Amaris supported.

“Hell no,” Harry snorted. “If they’re dogs, then you become a fucking dinosaur.”

A/N: Long time no see, homies! I have been busy and lazy and just couldn't be bothered writing, even though I wanted to. But I've finally got around to it, so here's Chapter 27. One of the last filler chapters, thank god. Next chapter will be OWLS, the chapter after all action. Thanks to DLP for their help.

The reaction of Hogwarts to Dumbledore's departure was exactly what Harry had thought it would be. Nobody would stop their damn whining. Even some of the Slytherin seemed to prefer the diddling old crackpot to Umbridge any day. Only a few select students that had fallen into the new Headmistress' favour, and the wrinkled bitch herself, seemed to be pleased with the new arrangements and they strutted through the corridors with expressions of pompous satisfaction spread across their faces. Harry thought that it was remarkable how things changed. A year ago, he would have been driven to near-fury and ripped through those self-satisfied morons with nothing less than glee. These days, he possessed a skill that almost rivalled his control of fire- the ability to keep his cool.

"What the fuck did you just say, you annoying little shit?" Harry snapped darkly. His eyes glinted angrily as he bore down on the shivering little third year.

The boy let out a startled squeak of fright as he pressed up against the walls, his eyes wide and his hands trembling as Harry loomed above him with a severely pissed off expression.

"I asked if you were okay!" he stammered, gulping nervously.

Harry paused and drew back, his anger fading.

"Really?" He asked in surprise, and the boy nodded frantically. "You...er...didn't say that I was gay?"

"No...it was okay," the boy said, looking a little more courageous now that Harry had stopped glaring at him.

For a split second, he could have sworn that there was a dark fire literally burning behind the older boy's eyes, and the very sight of it

had been enough to strip away whatever dignity and courage that he had possessed. Now though, Harry Potter seemed almost friendly as he frowned in puzzlement, and the boy was almost sure that he had imagined it.

“Oh,” Harry said, scratching his head. “Okay....gay....okay....gay. Huh. I wonder where that came from. Weird, don’t you think?”

“Y-Yeah,” the boy said with a nervous grin. He straightened himself up and, with a quick nervous wave, practically bolted down the corridor.

“He’s a strange one,” Harry mused to himself.

He shuffled his books in his arms and set off down the hallway from the Transfiguration classroom, a decisive scowl unconsciously forming on his face. Behind him trailed his small female shadow, watching everything with her unblinking eyes and a mind that spun out a hundred different questions, every single day.

“The young human was correct,” Amaris said blandly as she pattered behind Harry. “He was merely asking about your well-being after you bumped into the wall. I am curious as to why your subconscious misunderstood his words. They say that the human psyche allows for doubts and beliefs to be generated by the unconscious mind in order to prevent a major psychological incident. Are you gay, father?”

Harry groaned and rolled his eyes.

“Amaris, you are a living, breathing example that proves that I’m not gay,” he said tiredly.

“How am I example of your lack of gay?” Amaris asked curiously. She tilted her head. “And what is wrong with being gay? I thought all humans aspired to be gay, rather than wallow in their negative emotions.”

“If you say that you think that gay means happy, I’m gonna bop you,” Harry said flatly.

He heard rather than saw Amaris pause and close her mouth and sighed. Hogwarts had started to suck after Dumbledore had been forced out, especially with Umbridge in charge of everything. He already had three detentions with the old bitch. He gripped his wand in his pocket and determination brewed in his eyes. If she tried to pull another Cruento quill on him, he would...

"Harry!" Somebody called out loudly.

Harry didn't even acknowledge the voice, his scowl only vanishing once as he yawned. The sound of running footsteps hit his ears but he didn't even twitch as Amanda came up beside him, her face red and an annoyed glare of her decidedly undaunting features.

"Didn't you hear me, Harry?" Amanda demanded, brushing a few wisps of blonde hair out of her eyes. "I've been calling you all the way from Transfiguration. Oh, hello Amaris."

"Hello, mortal," Amaris said. Harry had gotten enough read on her voice to know that she had interjected a rather disdainful tone in her greeting- not that anybody would notice.

Harry didn't respond, but glanced down at his daughter. Amaris nodded her head and gazed up at Amanda with her usual apathetic expression.

"Harry tells me to tell you that he has decided to ignore you at the current moment," the slim, pale-skinned girl said quietly. "Furthermore, he tells me to tell you that you are an intellectually-inferior creature from a subspecies of the human race that should have died out long ago."

"Um..." Amanda trailed off, a slightly bemused look plastered on her face. "What?"

"You are being ignored," Amaris said. "And you are an intellectually-inferior creature from a subspecies of the human race that should have died out long ago."

"I don't get it," Amanda answered a moment later. "I'm a what?"

“Oh, for the love of...” Harry growled and spun around, jabbing a finger at Amanda. “Really, were you born retarded or did I finally manage to invent a time-travel machine that will allow me to travel back to your birth and belt the living crap out of your ugly, wrinkled fetus face? What she said was...”

“You are being ignored,” Amaris started.

“I am ignoring you,” Harry called out loudly.

“And you are an intellectually-inferior creature from a subspecies of the human race that should have died out long ago,” Amaris finished.

“And you’re a stupid Nenderfal!” Harry finished triumphantly. He frowned. “Nenderfal. Neandfal. Neadthal. Neanderthul.”

‘Neanderthal,’ Meciél supplied helpfully.

“Neanderthal,” Harry said quickly. He gestured at Amanda. “You. Neanderthal. That’s you. It’s a tricky word, isn’t it?”

“Are you still pissed off at me?” Amanda said, rolling her eyes at his antics. She glared at Harry. “Alright, so the DA made a mistake! Get over it!”

“If I had a sense of humour, I would remark that ‘it’ is actually a metaphorical construct of an event that has already transpired, therefore, we are unable to physically ‘get over’ it,” Amaris remarked blandly.

Harry paused in a furious retort and gaped down at her. Amaris stared back with unblinking eyes.

“Did you just make a joke?” He asked in shock.

“No,” Amaris answered tonelessly. “I am not able to make jokes, for I have no sense of humour.”

"There it is again!" Harry said furiously. He glanced up at Amanda. "That was a joke, right? I'm sure it was. It couldn't have been anything else! A joke!"

Amanda nodded as Harry bent down over the girl, his face looking as if he were pondering something. He tapped on Amaris' head and bent his head down as if to listen to whatever was inside. Amaris didn't move, but her lips twitched, while Amanda just looked on with exasperation.

"Honestly, Harry, I don't know who the bigger kid here is," she said.

"Oh, I think we all know that Potter's missing a few brain cells," somebody drawled and snickered.

"You hear that, Amaris?" Harry asked as he stood up. "That is the sound of chronic retardation. Try not to breathe through your nose. It's usually accompanied by fifty litres of hair gel and syphilis."

"You should learn some respect for your betters," Malfoy sneered as he approached them. His two burly friends flanked him left and right, both sneering menacingly.

"Well, I haven't met him yet," Harry remarked casually. "I'll be sure to kill him when I do. Can't let anyone be better than me, you know."

Malfoy tutted in false sympathy.

"That will be five points from Gryffindor for threatening a member of the Inquisitorial squad. Another five points for insulting a member of the Inquisitorial squad. Oh, and five more points for blocking the hallway when a member of the Inquisitorial squad is trying to walk past."

"We have an Inquisitorial squad?" Harry said in surprise, and peered down the hallway. "Cool. Where is it?"

"It's me, you idiot," Malfoy snapped.

“Oh,” Harry uttered, his face falling. He assessed Malfoy carefully. “Huh. Really lowered there standards, haven’t they? Then again, they used to kill heathens and Jews in Spain back in the good old days. I suppose we could find an analogy in there somewhere.”

“What are you babbling on about?” Malfoy sneered. “That’s another five points for talking nonsense.”

Amanda groaned, but Harry ignored her and straightened up.

“I’ll talk some sense then, shall I?” He asked, and levelled Malfoy a lazy and arrogant smile. “You’re a fuckface.”

“Five points,” Malfoy growled, twitching in anger.

Harry frowned and nodded slowly.

“Dipshit?” He tried.

“Ten points,” Malfoy said tightly, his cheeks flushing with colour as he clenched his fists.

“Moron?”

“Twenty points!”

“Okay, how about this,” Harry offered with a brilliant smirk. “You’re adopted and nobody loves you.”

“Fifty points!” Malfoy practically shrieked.

“Gee, Malfoy, lighten up,” Harry said cheerfully. “I’m sure that...er...” he gestured at the two burly boys by his side. “I never did get their names.”

“Crabbe and Goyle,” Amanda supplied. She thought of speaking up, but merely sighed and flicked a few blonde strands out of her face. She glanced down at Amaris and said, softly, “No getting him to stop when he’s in one of these moods.”

“Crab and Goil,” Harry said thoughtfully. He made a face. “Nah. Anyway, I try not to learn the name of minions. It’s just a waste of brain space, since I usually end up killing them.”

The two boys sneered at him angrily, while Malfoy smirked, a none-too-clever retort obviously on the tip of his tongue. Harry, however, interrupted him

“Seriously, is that all you guys do? Sneer, smirk, sneer again, drawl something stupid, smirk, sneer- it’s like a predictable formula!” Harry trailed off with a disgusted expression on his face. “The only reason you two minions don’t do it is because you’re as dumb as a dead fish.”

“Just how mentally-impaired is a dead fish?” Amaris asked curiously.

“Oh, about the same as that,” Harry answered casually, jerking his thumb and Crabbe and Goyle. “It’s good that they do it though. I’m always in need of a bit of stress relief and these guys just stand here and let me do it.”

“Well....what...what do you do then?” Crabbe burst out furiously, struggling and failing to find an insult in his thick head. Malfoy just rolled his eyes at his friend’s incompetence.

“Oh, well, that’s easy,” Harry answered with a bright smile. “I’m the one who goes off into witty tangents about hysterically funny insults and degradations while the other guys just stand there like a pack of morons. I push and prod till they make the extremely stupid move of trying to physically attack me, whereby I drop them like the lot of brain-dead fish they are.”

Goyle growled and moved forward, raising one of his fists. Harry was quicker than the large brute though and, despite his size, three times as strong, and he sidestepped and drove his elbow into the other boy’s stomach. A blur of movement and a few well-placed, yet decidedly cheap, shots saw Malfoy and Crabbe fall to the ground as well.

“What are you doing, Harry?” Amanda asked in exasperation.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Harry asked, lowering his arms and studying his nails with interest. “I’m the guy who makes the long funny speeches that precede the belting up of the other guys.”

“Our points...”

“Look, they’re going to take the points anyway,” Harry said lazily. “We may as well do something that merits it.”

“Umbridge will come after you,” Amanda hissed furiously.

“She’s already after me,” Harry answered with a scoff. “I need to last one more week, then I’m out of here. I think I’ll be alright.”

“What if she expels you?” Amanda persisted as they walked away from the groaning Slytherin’s.

“I’ve got it on good authority that she won’t,” Harry answered.

“What if she does anyway?” Amanda snapped.

“Er...well,” Harry trailed off with a frown. “You didn’t see me do that, did you?”

“See what?” Amaris asked quietly.

“Aha!” Harry cried, his finger whipping up and levelling down at Amaris. “Another joke! I knew it.”

Amanda rolled her eyes.

“There’s no getting to him when he’s in one of these moods,” she muttered to herself.

“Welcome, Mr Potter,” Umbridge said sweetly. “Come in, please.”

Harry carefully schooled his face and steeled his will as he opened the door to the Defence against the Dark Arts and walked inside. It was just as bad as he remembered it to be, with the ornamental

plates hanging on the wall, a little kitten meowing pathetically in each of them, and the large frilly pink curtains across the window. It was just...cute, in a most sickening way.

‘Urge to kill, rising,’ Harry thought in disgust.

‘This witch undoubtedly has problems,’ Meciél murmured. ‘What self-respecting woman of power would bind herself to pitiful childhood fancies?’

‘What, you’re a social commentator now?’ Harry thought, but focussed in as his eyes swept over the owner of the office.

Umbridge sat behind her desk, her pink cardigan draped around her shoulders and her beady black eyes contrasting with her wide, slack smile. She motioned Harry in with her hand, a heavily jewelled ring sitting on one of her fingers, and gestured for him to take a seat. Harry sat down cautiously, his mind merging with Meciél to increase his perception tenfold. If there had been so much as the faded residue of a cleaning charm on the chair, Harry would have known about it. However, that there was no hidden curse on his seat just made him more cautious. It meant that he had no idea what her next move was.

“I’m here for my detention,” Harry remarked sourly. “I still don’t know why I’m here, but hey, you’re the boss now.”

“Yes, I am,” Umbridge said, still smiling strangely at him. There was a hidden longing beneath her eyes, a dark intent that stayed with her as she simpered and smiled. “Please, have a cup with me. It’s hot chocolate. I made it especially for you.”

Harry glanced down at the teacup in front of him.

‘She’s not exactly subtle, is she?’ Meciél said wryly.

‘I was just thinking that,’ Harry murmured in his head.

“No thanks,” he said out loud and watched Umbridge for any sign of a reaction. To her credit, she managed to hide her displeasure quite well, although her cheeks quivered at his denial.

“Mr Potter, I must insist,” Umbridge said, her smile never leaving her face. “It’s a cold night and you’ve been walking through all those draughty hallways. I wouldn’t want you catching a cold.”

“I’m alright,” Harry said, idly wondering how far Umbridge would go.

“I want you to have a cup of tea with me,” Umbridge said, her voice becoming dangerously sweet. She gestured to his cup. “Go on, drink up.”

Harry wrapped his hand around the warm cup and lifted it to his lip. His nostrils flared as he took in the rich aroma of hot chocolate, smelling nothing else.

‘Odourless and colourless then,’ Harry noted. ‘Well, to a human, anyway. What can you smell, Meciél?’

‘There is something there,’ Meciél murmured. ‘Potent, quite potent indeed. Belladonna, mixed in with something with a base nitrate and an non-reactive alkaline. Combined together, with the internal chemicals of your stomach, it might produce a neural toxin. There’s enough saturated magic in there to...’

‘Meciél,’ Harry interrupted, mindful of Umbridge’s watching gaze. ‘Truth Potion, Poison or some kind of mental control?’

‘I’d say it borders between a truth potion and a mental controlling substance. Most likely, it’s a very powerful potion that compels you to tell the truth.’

‘Umbridge wants answers,’ Harry thought grimly. ‘Can you beat it?’

‘With some difficulty, yes,’ Meciél said and Harry felt her reassuring presence wash over his mind, heat dribbling down his mouth and into his stomach. ‘Take a sip now.’

Harry opened his mouth and allowed a trickle of the liquid to seep through. He swallowed and immediately felt the effects as a strong, light-headed feeling washed over him. Something throbbed in his head, a sense of a presence that pounded away loudly with every heartbeat.

“Now then, let’s have a little chat, shall we?” Umbridge said softly, lowering her cup. “Tell me, Potter. Where is the location of Albus Dumbledore?”

The pressure suddenly slammed into his mind, a powerful force bending his mind in a certain direction, to the direction of the truth. However, just as it attacked, it was washed away in a tide of blazing fire as Meciél shattered the enchantments behind the truth potion.

‘Thanks,’ Harry thought gratefully. He might have been able to beat it on his own, but not without exerting considerable mental effort on his part.

‘It’s what I’m here for,’ Meciél shrugged off the praise, although she sounded pleased. ‘Quickly though, I suggest that you use this opportunity to sow some misinformation.’

‘Oh, this will be fun,’ Harry said with a mental smile.

He refocussed his attention, which had only been off for mere moments, and, his tone and expression as bland as he could make them.

“Nottingham,” Harry answered dully.

“Dumbledore is in Nottingham?” Umbridge said excitedly and reached for her quill. “I knew he would tell you! Where in Nottingham? How can I find him?”

“Eastwood,” Harry answered again. “To find him, you need to travel to Blackheath in Surrey. Along the main street, there is a fish and chip shop. In the kitchen, there is a notepad hidden underneath one of the cabinets. Inside the notepad, there is a key to an airport locker. Inside

that locker, Dumbledore has left me a note detailing his movements and address in Nottingham.”

“Excellent, excellent,” Umbridge muttered to herself, furiously scrawling everything down. “The old fool. To use so much subterfuge and be defeated so easily.”

Harry couldn’t help himself and snorted. With his lips closed, it came off as a peculiar chocking noise in the back of his throat. Umbridge glanced up at him sharply, but he made a motion of slightly furrowing his brows and rubbing his throat.

“Are you having a bad reaction to the Veritaserum?” Umbridge asked worriedly. “Goodness knows I need you collapsing in here!”

“No,” Harry answered instantly.

“Good,” Umbridge said. She smiled at him, her beady eyes wide with anticipation. “Now, tell me Potter, have you ever seen the criminal Sirius Black.”

“Yes,” Harry answered in a monotone voice.

“Really?” Umbridge gasped. “Where? What was he doing?”

“Yes,” Harry answered again. “I saw him in France and he was raising an army of Nintendoids to use against the Ministry of Magic.

“Raising an army?” Umbridge gasped, quickly scrawling down what he said. “What are Nintendoids?”

“Nintendoids are the final product of a year and a day’s construction of conjured and animated soldiers,” Harry described, struggling hard to keep the grin off his face. “They are small and rectangular, with the ability to shoot out cartridges at their enemies.”

“Cartridges?” Umbridge questioned excitedly, her head bent down over her parchment.

“Powerful weapons,” Harry said and paused, drawing a mental blank. “They...the Nintendoids are the foot soldiers of Dumbledore’s army.”

“Wait! Sirius Black is working for Dumbledore?” Umbridge asked sharply, her slack smile disappearing in her astonishment.

“Yes,” Harry said tonelessly. “Sirius Black is raising an army so that Dumbledore might crush the Ministry of Magic.”

“So Dumbledore was on Black’s side all along,” Umbridge mused, a gleeful smile forming over her face.

“No,” Harry interjected quietly. “Dumbledore is only using Sirius Black for his own needs. He has told the criminal that he intends to take the Minister of Magic position by force, but that is a lie.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t want to be Minister of Magic?” Umbridge gasped, a hand coming to her mouth. “What does he want?”

“To take Fudge’s bowlers hat,” Harry said.

“To take the Minister’s...hat,” Umbridge said slowly. She narrowed her eyes, staring at Harry suspiciously.

“Yes,” Harry said, stifling a wince. He had pushed it too far. How could he recover from- oh, that was it.

“Why?” Umbridge asked carefully.

“Because Fudge’s hat is a powerful magical artefact of untold strength, capable of destroying Dumbledore in an instant,” Harry answered.

“What?” Umbridge shrieked. “What do you mean?”

“Centuries before Merlin’s time, there was a powerful circle of wizards,” Harry invented randomly. “They fought against...evil and...lies...and to do so, they created the helmet of Stup’d b’nt, a weapon capable of purging magic from those who fought against their order.”

"The stooped bent," Umbridge repeated. "I have never heard of this language before. Continue."

"Before they could use it, the council was killed by a...flood, that washed them away for all of eternity," Harry continued, his mind racing frantically. "The helm...gained the magic of all of the powerful wizards and became, in a way, alive. It disguised itself amongst the top and brightest wizards of the ages, sitting on the head of wizards such as Merlin and Ravenclaw, appearing nothing more than a mere hat. Fudge came across the helm one day, and, sensing his power and spirit, it decided to choose him to be the...avatar...of...justice against the lies of evil. It sits on top of his head, protecting him in ways he can not understand and awaiting the right time to awaken. Dumbledore wishes to destroy it before it can bloom into it's full powers, before Fudge gains the ability to annihilate him completely."

Umbridge sat in stunned silence as Harry finished. The Denarian made a great show of groaning and putting his hand to his head, making Umbridge pack away her parchment with great haste.

"Professor?" Harry said, feigning weakness. "What...where am I? What happened?"

"Mr Potter, how dare you fall asleep during my detention!" Umbridge said loudly. She plastered a sweet smile over her face and put a hand on his shoulder. "Get to bed, dear. I think we're done here."

Harry shuddered at the touch and stood up, making sure to stumble as he walked to the door. As soon as he was out, and the door was closed, his face transformed from stoic to amused in a heartbeat.

"Oh, that was golden," Harry said, chuckling softly to himself. He sniggered under his breath as he climbed to the Gryffindor Tower. "Pure gold."

'Allow me to recap,' Meciell said. 'Dumbledore is making Sirius Black raise an army of video game consoles on the belief that he wants to take over as Minister of Magic, but all Dumbledore wants to do is steal Fudge's bowlers hat.'

"Pretty much, yeah," Harry grinned. "How good was that?"

'Keep your day job,' Meciél advised.

"You seem thoroughly amused," Amaris noted as she perched on the end of Harry's four-poster bed.

"I also seem thoroughly occupied as well," Harry remarked flippantly. He was lying down on his bed, his nose practically buried in Dumbledore's Grimorie. "However, since I am thoroughly amused, I will ignore your impoliteness and answer you. Yes, I am quite amused."

"I see," Amaris said unblinkingly. She tilted her head and stared at him strangely. "Are your mood swings the result of a hormonal balance or the fracturing of your psyche when the symbiotic being nested in your soul?"

"Purely hormonal," Harry said flatly, frowning at something on the page. "I don't get out a lot and my right hand is having a tiff with me."

"I see," Amaris said quietly.

"Usually when you say that, you don't," Harry remarked, then scowled. "See, Meciél," he said out loud, "this book is good and all, but it's missing a hell of a lot of stuff. This spell here- you can perform it twice as quick with a left flick of the wand, and only lose fifteen percent of the power."

"Yes, yes," Meciél said with a sigh. "You've been pointing out the book's flaws for over an hour now."

Her illusion wandered around the room, her silvery eyes constantly flickering back to Amaris with an unreadable expression in them. Harry was beginning to get annoyed with just how fascinated Meciél seemed with his daughter. Amaris, used to Harry's tendency to apparently- talk to himself, remained quiet.

"Not my fault the book doesn't know what it's talking about," Harry grumbled under his breath. "It's missing out on all the good spells, too." He paused and his face lit up. "Hey, do you think I should add them in?"

"Dumbledore may not like that," Meciél warned absently.

"Eh, stuff him," Harry snapped, reaching to his bedside table for his quill. "It's my book, anyway."

"Very well," Meciél answered. She paused, a distant look in her eyes. "Before you do, flip to page forty-six. I want to clarify something."

Harry scowled but did as he was told. He glanced down for an instant, then flicked back, knowing that Meciél was more than able to read the page in that short moment.

"As I thought," Meciél murmured. A satisfied expression came over her face. "I have almost constructed our first spell together."

"Oh, really?" Harry said interestedly.

"I have been through all the theoretical frameworks Dumbledore has provided us with," Meciél answered. "With a grasp on the laws of magic, the possibilities are endless."

"What will the spell do?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Well," Meciél hesitated. "You must understand that this is a testing period only..."

"Not much then," Harry concluded with a grunt. "Pity. I wanted something with brimstone and fire and all that crap."

"You already have those spells," Meciél said exasperatedly.

She sat down on the end of his bed, idly glancing down at Amaris, and Harry marvelled once more on just how real she could make her illusions seem, as he perceived the bed itself sinking under her weight and caught a whiff of the fragrance that was utterly Meciél.

‘Okay, seriously, Meciél,’ Harry thought at the Fallen. ‘Do you have a hard-on for Amaris or what?’

‘Don’t be vulgar,’ Meciél responded back, her illusion narrowing its eyes at him. ‘I am just interested. I have never had a host that has had a child before.’

‘Never? In the thousands of years you’ve been down here, you’ve never had a mummy or daddy before?’ Harry thought in surprise.

‘Surprised?’ Meciél thought amusedly.

‘Not really, just marvelling at the statistical chances of that happening,’ Harry responded. ‘Well, don’t get too used to her. I’ll admit, Amaris is okay, but at the end of the year, you know that Maeve will be back for her and we’ll never see her again.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ Meciél mused. ‘Amaris was created by Maeve for a reason and it is somehow directly related to you. You will see her again after this, I can guarantee it.’

“Creepy,” Harry mocked out loud.

He ignored Amaris’ questioning look and went back to scribbling on one of the suddenly-appearing blank pages in the book. Only a frown remained on his face, his mind idly pondering Meciél’s words. Damn, he hated mysteries.

A/N: This has been a long time coming. Thanks for those at DLP who motivated me and reviewed the WIP chapter. Thank especially to Oz and Inferis for going over this chapter for an all-time record of stuff-ups. Thanks to Dakatim for reminding me about the sword. Thanks for Jon for WHINGING at me to keep at this.

If I thank anymore people, the music will try to play me off. I hope you enjoy.

Harry didn't know how much of the bogus information Umbridge took seriously, but for the next week it seemed as if Hogwarts's newest Headmistress was somewhat stressed. Nonetheless, Harry found that he didn't really give a shit about Umbridge anymore. In fact, the only thing that Harry managed to routinely occupy himself with was thoughts of just what he was going to do after he was free. The OWL exams were looming up quicker than ever and for most of the students, it was a frantic and doomed to begin with race against the clock to cram as much information into their little useless brains. While they did that, Harry sat back in his favourite chair in the Gryffindor common room and occasionally slept in front of the fireplace as his mind conjured the wonderful fruits of freedom- while Meciél provided the sour grapes of reality.

On the morning of the first exam, Harry found himself doing exactly that.

'You're going to need a new place to sleep,' Meciél pressed. 'A new house or apartment will cost money, far more money than we have at the moment. You will also to create new wards, which will result in a couple of weeks of work at the very least.'

'Perhaps you didn't hear me,' Harry thought lazily, stretching himself in front of the blazing fire with his eyes closed. A very vivid illusion of a long, white, sandy beach and bikini-clad woman plastered itself in his mind. 'Brothels in Hawaii- that's all we need to think about for now.'

'That's all you have ever think about,' Meciél grumbled and the illusion abruptly shattered. It was replaced with a deep blue sky and

rolling green meadows, as far as his mental eyes could see. A soft breeze hit him, bringing with it the smell of fresh grass, clean air and a sweet fragrance- much like a perfume- of such riches that it could only be matched to the most beautiful woman Harry had ever met.

But he'd never give her the satisfaction of hearing that.

Meciel appeared before him, her illusion clad in her white dresses and her silver eyes regarding him sternly. She looked quite put out that he was ignoring her.

"I worry about where we are going to sleep. I have grown used to a certain standard of luxury these past years," Meciel said primly. "I do not wish to for it to go back to how it once was, scrabbling amongst the homeless in dark alleys or dirty, smelly mattresses in cheap, inhospitable motels."

Without so much as a gesture from her, the peaceful landscape was replaced with darkness. A row of streetlamps blazed in a smog-filled night sky and the meadows became a string of large shabby buildings. In front of him was a filthy alley, filled with the broken glass of alcohol bottles and the splintered remains of syringes.

"You speak of my childhood as if it were a bad thing," Harry said, peering down the alley with interest. "Oh, I remember this place. You have to admit though, they were some of the good old days."

At Meciel's raised eyebrows, Harry scoffed.

"C'mon," he complained. "There was something liberating about them. I'll tell you, you never feel so alive when you're scrambling in the dirt with some pathetic criminal over a twenty pound note."

"If I recall, you lost that fight," Meciel noted, gesturing to one of the broken bottle on the ground. Harry followed her hand and noted the blood- his blood- on it. "And I had to hold you as you cried yourself to sleep that night."

Harry winced and kicked at the bottle, watching with satisfaction as it soared through the air and smashed against one of the brick walls. In

the distances, a police siren screamed away and in one of the apartments above, a loud, thick Irish voice bellowed in a rage only brought on by drunkenness.

“Hey, I was seven. I didn’t know any magic yet and I was as weak as piss,” he grumbled half-heartedly. “I got back at him thought, came around the next week and smashed him over the head with a tire iron.”

“I think you killed him,” Meciél said amusedly.

“Yeah, probably,” Harry shrugged. He scowled. “Fucking drugged-up losers.” He paused, and his voice lightened as his eyes “That was our second week together, wasn’t it? I remember, it was just when the reality of our situation had hit me.’

“It was,” Meciél said from behind him. Harry heard her soft footsteps walk up to him and place a warm hand on his shoulder, a fond tone entering the Fallen’s voice. “You were such a cry-baby back then, so needy for attention and desperate for any type of affection.”

“Yeah, well,” Harry muttered, scratching the back of his head and scowling at Meciél. “Don’t tell me you didn’t like it. I know you like playing the doting mother at times. You’re such a softie.”

“Oh, perhaps,” Meciél concluded easily, a warm smile wrapped on her face. “If I weren’t, I would have consumed your soul, broke your mind and used your weak body to my own ends until I had found another that better suited my purposes.”

“Ooh, I’m scared,” Harry mocked, flailing his arms in the air with exaggerated look of fear on his face. He lowered his arms and gave her a smirk. “Like I would have let you anyway.”

“Like you could have stopped me,” Meciél said evenly. She spoiled the moment by ruffling his hair, making him squirm on the spot.

“Meciél,” Harry groaned petulantly. He scowled at her, but the expression cleared in an instant as he thought of an idea, and he

snapped his fingers. "That's it, I know what we can do after we finish here."

"What?" Meciél asked, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

"Travel," Harry declared firmly.

"Travel?"

"It doesn't have to be to Hawaii," Harry elaborated. "But...I don't know," He shrugged his shoulders, "Let's just leave England and this mess and go away for a few years. Fuck Voldemort and fuck Vesper. If they come after us, then we'll crush them."

"That could be perceived as running away," Meciél noted.

"Eh, since when have I ever cared what other people thought about me," Harry scoffed. "If I did, I'd stop talking to 'myself' in the Great Hall."

"Perhaps we could get away for a little while," Meciél remarked after a moment, her eyes distant. "You have been quite stressed since coming to Hogwarts. It would be a good chance for you to loosen up."

"I'm never loose, if you know what I mean," Harry said with an arrogant smirk.

"Yes, yes," Meciél said absently. She pondered something for a second. "I have been meaning to visit Pompeii for quite some time now, ever since that rather unfortunate incident some time back. I told them not to throw the coin into the volcano, but did they listen to me?"

"So it's settled," Harry said firmly. "After this, we're going on holidays."

"I think we could use some time away," Meciél agreed.

"Great," Harry exclaimed, clapping his hands together.

The surroundings around them changed, shimmering back into the long white beech and the sparkling blue-green sear. Meciél blinked

and glanced down at herself, noting that her dress had been replaced by a very sheer and skimpy bikini set. She frowned as Harry threw himself on an deck-chair- which had just popped from the depths of his imagination- and grinned up at her lazily.

“Feel free to take off your top,” he offered graciously. “I won’t mind, honest.”

Meciel narrowed her eyes and a slow, sweet smile curved her lips. Without a single gesture, her tall, slim beautiful body was suddenly transformed into a squat, wrinkled, flabby and was that a peni-

“Gah!” Harry spat out, his head whipping away and his eyes clenching shut. “Oh, for fuck’s sake! You did not just...that was...why would you...”

“Would you still like me to take my bikini off?” Meciel inquired politely, her voice remaining the same. “I will, if you really want me to.”

“No, no, no,” Harry growled in disgust, shielding his view from the monstrosity that Meciel had become. “Just...no.” As Meciel smiled and reverted back, he shuddered and opened his eyes. “That’s not cool,” he muttered under his breath.

“That’s beside the point,” Meciel started, before she glanced upwards into the light-blue sky.

A moment later, Harry felt something shake his shoulder and his consciousness was abruptly ejected from the illusionary world he had created in his mind. He opened his eyes with a scowl to see Amanda bending over him, her face nervous.

“C’mon, Harry,” she said, giving him another shake. Amaris stood nearby, ever-silent, staring at the both of them blandly.

“This better be good,” Harry growled.

“It’s time,” Amanda said. Her face was flushed and her tired eyes worried. “The OWL exams start in thirty minutes.”

“What, that’s it?” Harry scoffed. Nonetheless, he stood up and yawned as he stretched his relaxed limbs. “Ah, I may as well go and see how many people are pissing themselves.”

The large huddle of fifth years was eerily silent as they milled around the entrance to the Great Hall. The normally boisterous group spoke to each other in low tones, comparing last minute study notes and expressions of dread. Harry saw a few of them with their eyes clenched shut, reciting complex transfiguration theories under their breath. Hermione fell into one of the latter, her hair more frizzed up than usual. Standing next to her, looking far too pale to provide any type of support, was Ron, who was lifting his hand up to his nose and sniffing rather harshly.

“What’s that?” Harry asked lazily, leaning back on the stonewall behind him and looking entirely too relaxed in the opinion of the other students. “Have you finally cracked and taken up drugs? Let me tell you- heroin isn’t as good as everybody says.”

“It’s powdered dragon claw,” Ron confided softly, colour rushing to the tips of his ears. He gave a wary glance around him and leaned in closer. “Me and Amanda went in halves for an entire beaker of it. It’s meant to stimulate your thought processes.”

Harry took a doubtful glance at the greyish powder in the boy’s hands, and then arched an eyebrow at Amanda. She blushed under his gaze and ducked her head.

“Right,” Harry drawled. “Powdered dragon claw. Sure it is. Why, then, does it smell like the crap you were cleaning up at Grimmauld Place at Christmas?”

Ron paused mid-snort and gave Harry a horrified look. Harry grinned and looked away, glancing down at Amaris. He leant his arm on her head and grinned.

“You’re the prefect height for a portable armrest, you know,” he told her cheerfully.

"Thank you," Amaris said after a moment's pause, after deciding that what Harry said was a compliment in his sort of roundabout way. "These children, they do seem quite anxious."

"It's the exams," Harry said dryly. "They're at that stage when they think the whole world revolves school. Obviously, they've never been laid."

"I understand," Amaris said. She looked pointedly at Harry's arm digging into her hair but said nothing.

A few moments later, the doors to the Great Hall opened and Professors McGonagall and Umbridge stepped out, followed by a gaggle of truly ancient wizards and witches. Some of them fit the classic stereotype of the old crone. Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, silencing the entire crowd at once.

"Conformists," Harry said sourly. He glanced down at Amaris. "I feel like I should mention something about the proletariat and the evil bourgeoisie capitalist's bastards but these morons probably wouldn't get it."

"Thank you, Mr Potter," Umbridge said, her voice travelling over the group. Students' heads turned towards him.

Harry grinned and gave a mocking wave. "No, seriously, it's not a problem, Professor. Anytime you want me to talk when you're talking, feel free to ask me. I'll accommodate you as best I can."

"He's got a smart mouth," commented one of the other witches, a short, stumped crone with greying hair and wrinkles Harry didn't want to even look at. "If Albus were here, we could be guaranteed that behaviour like this would not occur!"

"Don't count on it, hag," Harry muttered.

"Nonetheless, Dumbledore is not here, Madame Marshbanks," Umbridge said with a slack smile. The irritation in her eyes belied her polite expression. "As I recall, he's on the run, wanted for charges of

treason. It'll only be a matter of time before the Aurors capture and subdue him."

There was dismayed muttering from the students but the old crone gave a cackling laugh. "I'll believe that when I see it!" she said snappily. "I was an examiner when Dumbledore came through his OWLs. He could do things with a wand I'd never seen before!"

"Holy...how old are you?" Harry burst out, staring at the old witch in surprise. Sure, she did look like she was something they had dug out from underneath a pile of dinosaur dung, but still!

"Old enough to know a ruffian when I see one," Marshbanks said haughtily, and gestured for McGonagall and Umbridge to continue as Harry mouthed the word 'ruffian' to himself with a confused expression on his face.

"Now, I am sure that you are all aware of the rules of this examination, but I will go over them so we are crystal clear," McGonagall said severely, peering over her glasses at the assembled students. "Powerful anti-cheating charms have been used to ensure that this exam remains fair. I urge you not to test them. Three students last year decided to use an 'all-seeing apple' to sneak a peak at other student's work. However, apparently it did not see Professor Snape coming up from behind them and they were expelled."

"Expelled!" Hermione gasped.

"Expelled!" Harry mocked in a high-pitch voice.

"Your first exam will be Charms- Theory," McGonagall continued severely as Hermione shot Harry an annoyed glare. "It will be a written test. You will be supplied with quills that have already been charmed with anti-cheating spells." She peered down at the students and her face softened. "Good luck, all of you."

Harry rolled his eyes but straightened up. With a careless wave of goodbye to Amaris, he stalked into the hall. The four house tables had been arranged to face the head table, where an old wizened man

stood, two thick tufts of white hair sticking out from his scalp like horns.

“Please, take a seat,” he said in a surprisingly deep voice.

They all sat down and waited as the quills were passed around. The wizard approached the podium again and gestured to a large hourglass beside him. “You will have until the sand reaches the bottom. Begin.”

Harry turned over his paper when the wizard gave the go-ahead and glanced over his first question, which asked for the wand movements and incantation of the levitation charm. He stared down at the exam with a rueful look on his face.

‘I probably won’t even need you for this kind of crap,’ he thought to Meciél. He grinned and picked up his quill, tapping it thoughtfully on the side of his mouth. The anti-cheatings spells were far too weak to even try to counter Meciél’s presence, so they remained silent. ‘I suppose it’s time that I picked up Dumbledore’s academic record that I keep hearing about and smash it to bits.’

‘Showing off, are we?’ Meciél asked lightly.

‘I prefer the term ‘bragging’,’ Harry thought.

After the theory exam, in which Harry had tried to cram as much advanced information on it as he knew (and some he didn’t, thank you Meciél), it was time for lunch. Afterwards came the practical exam- and Harry was looking forward to this. He was directed to a line, where he waited for his name to be called out by an excitable Professor Flitwick.

“Off to Professor Tofty, Potter,” the midget squeaked. “Off you go! I expect to hear great things about you after this!”

Professor Tofty was a small- though not as small as Flitwick- and wheezy wizard with silver hair. He smiled at Harry encouragingly.

“Alright, Mr Potter, could you please demonstrate a levitation charm for me, using the proper incantation and wand movements,” he asked.

“I could,” Harry said. He flicked his wand with an arrogant smirk and the glass vase lifted up from the ground, spinning madly on its axis. Another flick saw the vase weave through a complex series of movements before coming down to hover gently above the Professor’s hand.

“Wonderful!” Tofty breathed.

Harry grinned, revelling in the look of astonishment and delight that had spread over the Professor’s face. He bowed low, slapping on an arrogant and haughty expression and straightening his shoulders.

“Of course it’s wonderful,” he said quietly. “I am, after all, Harry Potter, and as the women can testify, I am the man who lived.”

He ruined the moment by snickering and raking his hand through his hair. Professor Tofty smiled at him and, after glancing down at his list, motioned at an orange lying on the table before him.

“Show me what you can do with this orange,” he said, watching Harry closely.

Harry frowned and picked up the orange. After observing it at different angles, he made a low humming noise in the back of his throat. “Yes, yes,” he muttered to himself. With careful movements, he placed the orange on his head. “Well, I can make it into a tie or a scarf or a hat,” he said with a grin.

“Mr Potter, please be serious,” Professor Tofty said.

“I am serious,” Harry said earnestly.

“I will have to...” Professor Tofty started, before pausing and staring at Harry in surprise. “Was that transfiguration? When did the orange become a quill?”

“About the same time your quill became an orange,” Harry remarked.

Professor Tofty glanced down at his hand and started in surprise. Sure enough, he was holding the orange in his hand. He gaped at Harry and then chuckled, partly in amusement and partly in awe.

“That was a perfect switching spell! What’s more, I didn’t even realise it had happened! There was no change in the weight or feel of the orange until I realised I was holding it!” he marvelled.

“I’m surprisingly good with illusionary charms,” Harry said with a self-satisfied grin. “You didn’t feel any change because I didn’t want you to.”

He gave an idle flick of his wand. The quill on his head and the orange in the professor’s hand switched once more, with only a hint of something like static fuzz to show for it. Harry plucked the orange from his head and, with a flick of his wand and a lazy smile, he sent it spinning through the air in a shower of multicoloured sparks. It landed on the table with a loud surprising thud, enough to cause a small dent.

“Weight-expansion charm,” Professor Tofty murmured. “My my, Mr Potter. I haven’t seen anything like this since- well, ever! I hope the rest of your exams go as well as this.”

“I have no doubt,” Harry said confidently.

A small but thunderous explosion tore through the Great Hall. Wooden splinters went flying amidst cries and screams of surprise and shock and copious amounts of thick smoke billowed up into the air. With a flick of his wand, Harry removed the smoke and debris from his transfiguration desk and grimaced at the large smouldering hole in his desk. He glanced at the old crone (Marshbanks, he thought her name was) and attempted to smile charmingly.

“Fucking hag,” Harry muttered under his breath. He stalked past a group of smirking fifth years, who were no doubt giggling about him. “Stupid old bitch taking points away from my exam...it was a crappy mouse anyway! Who cares if I blew it up a little? I should go and find the carcass and ram it right up her...”

"Her what?" Amaris asked curiously, her wide eyes staring unblinkingly into his as she made her presence known.

"What the hell!" Harry snapped, suppressing an automatic reflex to blast the living shit out of what had just startled him. He glanced to his side and shook his head in disgust. "Amaris," he said wearily. "One day you're going to get your head blown off and that'll suck, because then you won't have the ears to hear me saying 'I told you so'."

"Yes, Father," Amaris said. "I'm sorry, Father."

"Yes, Father," Harry mimicked in a high pitched voice. He scowled. "Don't be such a wimp. You know, you can tell me to go piss off sometimes."

"Wouldn't that make you angry?"

"Well, yeah," Harry admitted as he turned a left and stalked outside the Entrance Hall. He gave Professor Umbridge, who was standing right before the doors, a brilliant smile, and continued walking forward to his practical Defence against the Dark Arts exam. If Marshbanks had been impressed by Dumbledore's crappy performance, then Harry was going to rock her world.

Not in a sexual way, though. She was just too ugly for that.

After gaining the awe of Professor Tofty once more, the rest of the OWLs came and went with very little excitement. His potion exam was adequate, at best. He was certain that he scored top marks on the theoretical exam but there was a melted cauldron and a large irremovable stain on the floor that said that his marks in the practical side were going to be low. Apart from that, there had been a few more theoretical tests on History and boring shit like that, and then it was over.

Harry had done it. He had completed his OWL. For the first time in a very long time, he could leave this dump of a castle and go... well, anywhere.

"Hawaii was looking good, wasn't it?" Harry murmured as he stalked down the corridor.

He had just come from a very delicious dinner and was looking forward to a good snooze before he left tomorrow morning. He hadn't forgotten Dumbledore's advice of leaving as soon as his OWLs were finished. He didn't want to be here when the Aurors or whoever came for him on behest of Umbridge. It wasn't that he couldn't kick the crap out of them, rather, he only just finished his 'suspended sentence' and he didn't want to get put back on one again.

"Anything to see me in a bikini," Meciél said in a long-suffering voice. She walked on his left, her silver and white robes flapping in a wind that Harry could neither feel nor hear. The ever-silent spectre, Amaris, walked patiently on his right.

"You know, I bet the Fallen show off their bikinis to the other Denarians," Harry said, arching his eyebrows and staring at her pointedly.

"The other Fallen also crush and devour the minds of those Denarians," Meciél added, giving Harry her own pointed look.

"You're saying that the sight of a Fallen's breasts is enough to send..." Harry started with a lecherous grin, but paused as an owl soared through the empty corridor and settled on a gleaming suit of armour. It hooted at him and stuck out its leg, where a scroll had been hastily tied on to it.

"Haven't these people ever heard of postmen," Harry muttered as he snatched the letter, ignoring the owls protesting hoots. "Then again, they don't call it 'going owl-al', do they?"

"May I inquire as to the contents of the letter?" Amaris asked quietly.

"Son of a..." Harry started as he read through the letter with wide eyes. The handwriting was familiar, even if it was more of a messy scrawl than anything else- signalling to him that the writer had been in a rush.

Neville got a note. The Death Eater's kidnapped his Gran. We're going to get her back. R, Hr, G, L, N and me have gone to the Ministry, Department of Mysteries. Please help. Amanda

"Fucking idiots!" Harry snarled. He glared at the letter as if it was its fault and growled out loud. Of all the stupid things that the blonde twit had done, this had to be the worst. "That stupid moronic idiotic retarded..." he struggled to find words and ended it with a explosive 'Bah!' of disgust.

"I assume the news is not good," Amaris said dryly.

"Does the word 'TRAP!' mean anything to you, Amaris?" Harry asked her furiously. "I'm only asking to see if an eight-year-old has more sense than a Fifth Year! Those bloody morons are going to get themselves killed."

"That was always a certainty," Meciell said carelessly, not looking at all bothered by the news. "I will admit, I didn't expect it to be this quick, all things considered."

"Mr Potter!" Somebody called.

Harry spun around and groaned at the sight of Umbridge walking-nay- waddling towards him, her pink cardigan draped around her shoulders and her slack smile growing ever wider as she moved in close.

"Oh, great," Harry said unhappily. "This just keeps getting better and better."

"I've been looking for you," Umbridge said, her beady eyes narrowing in on him. "We need to have another little chat."

"I'd rather take it up the arse by a large black fellow in a prison cell," Harry said with mock cheerfulness. "And considering how much of a heterosexual I am, that's saying something."

"Potter!" Umbridge hissed, her cheek splotching with colour. She gaped at his audacity, but her look was quickly replaced with a

cunning smirk. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. Mr Potter, how dare you use such language in front of me? I thought you would have known better by now."

"Wha...?" Harry asked her, staring at her in baffled disgust. "Whatever gave you that stupid impression? Face it Umbridge, if I had to choose between you or a pile of pond scum, I'd have sex with the pond scum."

"You're in for it this time, Potter. You're coming with me," Umbridge snarled. She snatched Harry's arm, her sharp nails digging into his skin, and tried to drag him down the corridor.

"Yeah, right," Harry laughed and slapped Umbridge's hand away. She stared at him in absolute shock as he sneered down at her. "Listen, you toad-faced bitch. I've done my OWLs, so the usefulness of Hogwarts- and its rules- have come to an end. If you touch me again, I'm going to kill you and make it look like an accident. Do you understand me?"

"I...you...how..." Umbridge was shaking with rage. She whipped out her wand and brandished it at Harry.

The Denarian Knight moved as a blur, his wand appearing in his hand. A flash of light blasted through the corridor and Umbridge shrieked as she was lifted from her feet and thrown down the corridor with great force. She landed with a painful thump, her indignant, shrill cries echoing uselessly in the deserted hallway.

"Oh, that felt good," Harry said with relish. "I almost had an orgasm from that. Is that wrong?"

"If you experienced a sexual-orientated climax from the mere sight of subjecting a very ugly woman to a non-lethal curse, then yes, you do have a problem," Amaris said quietly.

"Thanks," Harry said, throwing her a dirty look. "But seriously, Meciell, I just knocked Umbridge on her arse. Damn, I love this moment so much that I want to have sex with it."

He glanced down at the note in his hand, Umbridge already dismissed from his mind. "I'm probably going to have to rescue them, aren't I? I did promise Dumbledore that I'd look after his students."

"He wouldn't expect anything less," Meciél said, although she didn't look too happy. "I was looking forward to my nap as well."

"We can always sleep afterwards," Harry said with a roll of his eyes. "They should call you 'Sloth', Meciél."

"Very funny," the Fallen woman said dryly. "You do realise that it's going to be a trap."

"I know," Harry said, frowning. "But is it a trap for them or did the Death Eaters let them send this letter? Or do they want me to think that this letter is a trap so I don't go and they can ambush me here? Are the students still alive or have they gotten themselves killed already?"

"You know, when you use your brain, you can come up with some insightful theories," Meciél noted. "But I don't know the answer to your questions. You should..."

"Crucio!"

Harry instinctually sidestepped the flash of magic, which rocketed past him. The oily tang of dark magic filled the air with its filthy stench, tendrils causing the hair on the back of his arm to stand up on end. If Harry had to describe the smell, it would be something resembling a fart. Sure, you know it smelt bad but there was something oddly addictive about your own stink.

"That is the most disgusting analogy to dark magic I have ever heard," Meciél exclaimed, wrinkling her pert nose up in disgust. She crossed her arms over her breasts and glanced down the corridor at the same time Harry did.

Umbridge had staggered up from the ground, her pink cardigan singed and sizzling with the after-effects of his curse. A wild look of fury and madness

"Oh, no, Umbridge," Harry said chidingly. Darkness flashed in his eyes in a nova of Hellfire as he levelled his wand at the witch, a sneer curling his lips. "It's like this. Crucio!"

Umbridge screamed in agony and fell to the ground as the curse wracked through her body. Harry took great pleasure in the sight as he stalked forward, his face a perfect picture of controlled malevolence. Sulphur burned in his nose and his veins pumped out Hellfire furiously.

"You've taken great pleasure in trying to make my life hell this year," he said conversationally. Hellfire and dark magic surged in his veins, bringing about a bliss that he had dearly missed these past months. "You've harassed me, assaulted me, tried to control me and now you've tried to curse me."

He lowered his head and lifted the Cruciatus, allowing Umbridge's involuntary sobs to fill his ears. "You should have known that I was dangerous ever since the White Council bought me here by sword. You should have avoided me. You didn't."

"I...I'm going to kill you, you little bastard!" Umbridge gurgled. Sweat poured down her forehead and her limbs were twitching. "I'm... the undersecretary for the Minister... of Magic! I can destroy you!"

"You are a weakling," Harry remarked coldly. "You're a pathetic weakling who couldn't do anything to hurt me." He straightened his back and stared down at her in contempt. "Everybody is prejudiced, Umbridge. Some of them believe that purity of blood matters. Others believe it's the colour of your skin. Me, I believe that strength counts. I respect power- the power to cast down your enemies, to wade into battle knee-deep in blood and to fight and destroy your enemies."

Harry ducked down to stare into her eyes.

"You have nothing that I respect," he hissed coldly.

He raised his fist and slammed it into her face. Hellfire enhanced his strength to the point where his hand smashed her nose open. Blood

splattered across her saggy face and her head lolled back as she was knocked unconscious.

"Huh," Harry muttered. He scowled. "Ruin my fun, you bitch," he growled as he stood up, letting go of his hold on Hellfire and allowing the power to run out of him. He smiled brilliantly and let out a soft laugh of enjoyment. "Oh, that was great. That was really good."

"So I noticed," Meciél commented.

"That moment there... that was so good that I would cheat on the other moment I had from before, marry this one and raise a family of tiny little moments!" Harry said gleefully. "Just... great!"

"As enjoyable as this is, don't we have more pressing matters to attend to?" Meciél asked quietly, staring down at Umbridge with a small, beautiful smile of satisfaction. She reached out and stroked Harry's cheek. "I have wanted you to do that for quite some time."

"Pressing matters...oh!" Harry exclaimed, glancing down at the forgotten letter still clutched in his hand. "Right. Students. Trap. Almost forgot about that."

He suddenly stiffened and glanced down at Amaris, who had watched the proceedings with a look of polite interest on her face. She glanced back at him impassively, her soulless green eyes showing neither disgust nor approval.

"Don't tell anybody you saw me doing this, okay?" Harry told her.

"As you wish," Amaris said, bowing her head. "You seem to be in a hurry. Would you prefer it if I were to clean up here?"

"That'd be great, Amaris," Harry said thankfully. On impulse, he bent down and planted a quick kiss on her warm head. "See you later!"

Amaris stared after him, her eyes wide with what appeared like surprise. She gingerly touched the top of her head and paused, something like a smile flittering across her face, before she turned back to Umbridge and the task at hand.

Harry strode away quickly, but halted with a peculiar expression on his face. The Gryffindor Tower was only a short distance away, and he couldn't resist the urge to head inside. He stormed up to his room, grabbed the cane that held the Sword of the Cross and left as quickly as he had come. When he was outside again, he blinked and looked down at the cane in surprise.

"Oh yeah," he muttered as the sword pulsed in his hand. He reached into his robes and pulled out his thick gloves to put them on. "Something's definitely going down tonight."

He almost broke into a run as he quickly left the tower and approached the Entrance Hall. The nearest place he could apparate would be just outside the Hogwarts gates. Suddenly, he stopped and paused, his head flying back to where he had just left Amaris and Umbridge.

"Do I want to know what she meant by 'clean up'?" Harry asked slowly.

"Probably not," Meciell answered.

A/N: A huge thanks to DLP (as usual) for helping me shape this chapter into what it was. I want to thank Oz especially, for doing a spelling/grammar check on the chapter by request. A kudos to you, my friend. For the others, my last exam is tomorrow and then I'll be able to write heaps. There's only a few more chapters left, and it's mostly good stuff. I hope you enjoy.

A loud bell clanged in the darkened halls of the Ministry of Magic. With a rattle that seemed to reverberate around the entire Ministry, the golden gates of the elevator opened as a cool, female voice intoned, "Level Nine: Department of Mysteries." There was a set of hesitant footsteps and fierce, harsh whispers, before the occupants of the lift crept out and started to make their way down the black corridor.

Amanda bit her lip, feeling both excited and hesitant as she followed Neville down the room with the large shelves. Glowing balls of light winked all around them, casting a mysterious glow over them. Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Luna followed behind her, each student in awe of their surroundings. Only Neville seemed to take no notice of some of the best-guarded secrets of the Ministry of Magic, his eyes fully focussed on the piece of parchment clutched in his fingers. His knuckles were white and he was trembling as he scanned the bottom line of the complex instructions he had received.

It had all started after dinner had finished, when a large, tawny owl had swooped down to Neville and dropped a letter on his head. Amanda hadn't seen the whole thing but she knew that the first lines consisted of something like 'We have your grandmother. If you tell anybody, we will kill her.' The only reason that she had found out was that she had been gathering the senior members of the DA (she wasn't going to let a foul toad like Umbridge stop her!) and Neville had knocked them over in his haste to get to the Ministry. In the end, the senior DA had insisted on coming and he couldn't be bothered arguing. Amanda had wanted to wait to find Harry but Neville had grown furious, shouting how his Gran didn't have the time. When it looked like he was going to leave without her, Amanda conceded, writing Harry a quick note and leaving with the others on threstrals to the Ministry.

After all, she was the best dueller out of the entire DA. If Neville or the others got hurt because she wasn't there, she would never forgive herself. A part of her knew that Harry would laugh at such petty sentiments, but another part said that Harry could take his bad attitude and shove it. They were her friends, no matter what he said.

"Here we are," Neville said softly. "Row 97."

"What are they?" Ron asked Hermione quietly. The bushy-haired witch shook her head as she answered.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "But if the Death Eaters and Lord Vol...well, him, if they want it then it can't be good."

"I don't think that's for you to decide, mudblood," somebody drawled.

Amanda gasped and spun around, her wand flying up and pointed straight at the face of a Death Eater. The tall man was hidden in the shadows, his silver mask hiding his features. Only his cold, grey eyes could be seen, staring at her with total disdain and disregarding her as a threat entirely.

More figures followed unit, slinking forward from the shadows without a noise. Most of them wore masks but one of them- a crazed-looking witch with pallid features, hollow, maniacal eyes and stringy, ratty hair- left her face exposed. She might have been called beautiful once, but whatever splendour that had been about her looked like it had been sucked out long ago.

"Oh, wee baby Nevie-Wevie," the woman cooed in a high-pitched voice. She pouted, crossing her arms over her black robes. "Are we missing your gran? Are we? Huh? Are we boy! Woof! Go fetch!"

She finished off with a loud cackle, her head tilted back as madness wracked in her limbs. Two of the masked Death Eaters sidled away from her, obviously feeling as uneasy or fearful as the Amanda and the rest of the DA.

Well, everybody apart from Neville. Amanda glanced at him and her eye widened at his face. The raw and utter fury that was there was nothing like she had seen on the kind and gentle boy before. Neville glared at the women, who caught his look and cackled again, holding her sides until tears poked out at the corner of her eyes.

"Enough," drawled the tall Death Eater. He motioned to Neville with his wand. "You were told to come alone."

"He's our friend," Amanda said determinedly. "We weren't going to leave him!"

The Death Eater shifted his gaze and Amanda swallowed, but remained defiant even as fear surged through her body. Ron's face was white and Hermione's hair was quivering as the Hogwarts students slowly backed up towards one another, their wands trained on the looming Death Eaters.

"Who cares?" One of the other Death Eaters growled. He was a large, burly male, by the looks of it. "Killing six weaklings is just as easy as killing one."

"You're going to kill us?" Ginny squeaked, her eyes wide with terror. Her wand was shaking in her hand and it looked as if it had finally dawned on her just how dangerous the situation was.

"If we don't get what we came for, then yes," the tall Death Eater said quietly. He motioned to the shelf. "Longbottom. There's an orb on the third row right in front of you. It has your name on it. Pick it up and give it to me."

Neville frowned and his eyes flickered to the shelf. Slowly, he scanned the third row until he found the orb that the Death Eater was looking for.

"S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D. Dark Lord and Harry Potter/Neville Longbottom (?)," he read out loud, confusion clouding his voice. "What do I have to do with Potter or You-Know-Who?"

“Harry?” Amanda muttered to herself. She sighed. “Of course, it’s always about him, isn’t it?”

“Never mind,” the woman snapped, the babying tone gone from her voice. “Pick it up, Longbottom, of your friend’s here can join your parents in the long-term ward of Saint Mungos!”

Amanda flinched at the threat, swallowing nervously and tightening her grip on her wand. Her eyes wandered around the room as she tried to remember what Harry had drilled into her head, tried to think of a spell that could allow them to get away. Her eyes fixed on the shelves and an idea started to form in her mind.

“Hurry, Longbottom,” the Death Eater snapped. “If you don’t want to think of your Grandmother then think of your friends. They will suffer and die if you fail us here.”

Neville sighed and, taking a deep breath, gently wrapped his hand around the orb. He cringed, probably expecting it to shock him or something. Amanda watched with tight features as Neville carefully lowered the orb off the shelf.

“Good!” The Death Eater hissed. “Very good! Now, hand it over Longbottom, there’s a good boy.”

Neville’s face shifted and a stubborn tilt came to his shoulders. He narrowed his eyes and curled a protective arm around the orb.

“No,” he stammered.

“What?”

“No!” He said more intently. “Not until I see my Gran! Give her back to me!”

The Death Eaters roared with laughter and Amanda suddenly had a sinking feeling in her heart. She glanced at Neville, who was shaking with anger at the dismissive way the Death Eaters were treating the matter.

“You never had his Gran, did you?” she asked.

“Of course not, you stupid girl,” one of the Death Eaters chortled. “If I had to spend anymore time around Augustus than I usually do, I would have to kill the old muggle-loving bitch!”

“You mean she’s not here?” stammered Neville, his bravado and confidence fleeing his body. He suddenly looked very vulnerable amongst the dozen or so Death Eaters that loomed above him.

“It just goes to show,” the lead Death Eater drawled in that oh-so-familiar way. “Gryffindors truly have no...”

“Depuli Conluxi!” Amanda hollered.

Her wand spat out nearly-transparent sparks as an opaque shield shimmered into existence around her, just in time to stop a blazing streak of fiery red light from one of the quicker Death Eaters. The shield buckled and strained, but Amanda had mastered this with Harry long ago and with a masterful twist of her wand, released the second part of the spell.

The globe of magic that surrounded her exploded from her, slamming into the lead Death Eater and sending him hurling backwards with a startled shout. Ginny screamed, and the Death Eaters started yelling as the spell struck the shelf before dissipating. With an ominous creak, the shelf toppled over, raining down hundreds of glowing orbs. Several of the Death Eaters yelled in panic, but the witch merely raised her wand with a giant cackle.

“Confremere!” the witch shrieked.

A pulse of dark light exploded from the tip of her wand, soaring up toward the falling orbs in a blazing cocoon of crackling energy amidst the tinkling chatter of the falling orbs. It exploded in an eerie boom, cascades of energy eagerly zapping forward. Dozens of orbs exploded in a flash of dark light, raining down little shards to the ground. Ghostly figures rose up from the mass of glass, dozens of voices mixing in with each other to create an incomprehensible noise.

At the same time, Amanda raised her wand and concentrated with all her might.

“Scindo Vellere!” She roared, her wand whipping up through the precise wand movements of the spell.

Magic surged through her wand and lashed out at the orbs, binding them in invisible coils. The mass-summoning charm looped together dozens of orbs and brought them right above her head so that they smashed and splintered against one another in a thunderous crash of broken glass. Ginny, who was nearest, shrieked and covered her ears with her hands and Amanda gave an unheard cry of pain, her ears ringing painfully at the deafening noise. Still, she whipped her wand up again and completed the second half of what Harry had taught her.

“Scindo Diremi!” She yelled- or she assumed she did, her hearing had dissolved into an eerie white noise. The mass-banishing charm sent the huge bundle of compressed glass and ghostly figures, all who were speaking in loud, harsh tones, flying straight towards the Death Eaters.

“Run!” Amanda felt herself scream at the others and, as her adrenaline rushed through her veins; she turned and fled from the Death Eaters as the deranged witch conjured a blast of searing flames that ripped through the falling debris. The woman shouted something but Amanda turned a corner and didn’t look back, her heart beating furiously in her chest.

Amanda fled down one of the corridors as fast as she could, panic surging through her veins. She glanced over her shoulder and gasped. She could have sworn that Hermione and Luna had been with her a second ago! Where had they gone?

“Damm!” She cursed, panting heavily and staring back at the corridor with a pained expression. She wiped her nose and clutched her wand to her hand tightly.

Her hearing was coming back now and she could hear the sounds of falling shelves and shattering spheres, as well as the loud, heavy

shouting of adult men. Every few moments, coloured light would flash in the distant darkness and Amanda both dreaded and was relieved by it. She hated knowing that each flash of light she saw could be ending the lives of her friends, but she knew that as long as the Death Eaters kept cursing, it meant that they hadn't been caught yet.

Suddenly she heard running footsteps and her heart lifted up in relief. A smile started to cross her face as a sprinting figure emerged from the darkened hallways. The smile faded in an instant as the deranged Death Eater witch from before burst forward, a manic smile across her sickly features.

"Crucio!" She screeched, brandishing her wand.

Amanda's eyes widened and she flinched as something flashed past her head, a crack of dark magic that left a slimy feeling across the back of her arms. She turned and ducked into the next row, fear pounding at her heart as the Death Eater chased after her.

"Plecto!" Amanda shouted, throwing her wand over her shoulder. Her ear, already sore from earlier, throbbed painfully as a whip-like crack filled the air, lashing out at the Death Eater.

"You fool!" the witch screeched, deflecting the spell with ease. "Ventungo!"

Amanda raised her wand, a perfect shielding charm rolling off her lips. Her shield flared with bright light as something invisible struck it, and although it deflected the worst of the spell, Amanda groaned as she felt something dig into her stomach. She stumbled down the last row of spheres and entered a short hallway filled with doors. Wincing with pain, she glanced down at her stomach and saw that there was nothing there at all.

"Run, you mudblood! Run while you can!" The witch shrieked.

Amanda groaned, gulped, and staggered down the hallway, her abdomen burning with an intense pain. She turned a corner and leant against the stone wall, relishing the feeling of the cold stone against her burning forehead. She had never felt so afraid before. Even when

she had been attacked by Nicodemus, she had barely known what was happening before she was out of it. Here, she was being hunted, chased down like some kind of wild animal, and the terror was getting to her. She closed her eyes and tried to relax, her ear straining to listen for any sign of the pursuing witch.

It was only a matter of moments before loud footsteps stormed into the hallway. Amanda pressed herself against the wall and gripped her wand tighter, recognising the heavy breathing as belonging to the insane witch. With a sudden bout of determination, Amanda sprung from behind the corridor and brandished her wand.

“Caecus!” She screamed.

Violet strands of light burst from the tip of her wand, weaving and spinning through the air to wrap around the witch’s face. The Death Eater let out a startled scream and Amanda grinned. Her grin faded when the scream became resounding laughter and her eyes widened with shock. The witch had reached up to her face and had literally yanked the spell- an Auror level curse that Harry had taught her- off her face with her left hand. Tendrils of purple light squirmed in the witch’s hand as she threw it aside, and her right hand sent forward a spinning streak of crimson light as she grinned madly.

Amanda shriek and ducked behind the wall again as the crimson light tore through the ground, ripping through stone and missing Amanda by a mere centimetres to the point where Amanda’s left sleeve was suddenly split down the middle and a fine line of blood seeped from her skin.

“You fool!” The witch cackled madly, her voice echoing out into the corridor. “I am Bellatrix Lestrange, the Dark Lord’s most loyal servant! He personally tutored me in the Dark Arts so foul that you can’t even begin to comprehend the power I wield over you! I can’t be defeated by a schoolyard whore like...”

She was cut off as Amanda darted back into the main hallway, sending a blast of silver light at Bellatrix. The mad witch screeched in surprise, her wand whipping up to smash the spells aside. She also ducked behind a wall, poking her head out to give Amanda a mad

grin, baring her yellowed teeth. But the smile faded as clumps of her hair fell to the ground and her eyes widened.

“The Dark Lord might have taught you, but Harry Potter taught me, you insane bitch!” Amanda snarled. She suddenly felt light-headed and her wand, which had been as heavy as a lead weight all this time, was light in her hand.

“Potter!” Bellatrix hissed madly, her voice grating on Amanda’s ears like nail down a blackboard. “Potter! Potter! Potter! I despise that...”

“Effodio!” Amanda yelled, darting back out again.

A silver flash of light blasted from the end of her wand with a loud crack and shot forward with deadly accuracy. Bellatrix whipped her head back just in time as it struck the wall, blowing out a large chunk and sending a spray of rocky debris whipping through the air. Bellatrix shrieked as she unceremoniously toppled over on her arse, the debris cutting into her skin.

Amanda grinned, turned around and sprinted forward, running away from the mad witch as fast as she could. She could hear Bellatrix let out a mad shriek and almost wept in relief as she came across the large revolving doors she had encountered previously. She opened the door and picked the first door she saw to enter. She slammed it shut and let out a sigh.

The Death Eater in front of her chuckled.

“Plecto!” Amanda cried, her wand whipping up on reflex.

The Death Eater parried it with ease, as he did with her next three spells, his eyes glittering behind his mask. He moved forward rather gracefully, his wand swinging up as he sent a gold streak of light surging forward. Amanda blocked his spell, but the next one, a glimmering crescent of silver, sliced through her shield. It struck her in the arm and blood sprayed to the ground as it sliced through her shoulder, digging in deep, straight to the bone.

Amanda screamed and fell to the ground, clutching her arm and dropping her wand. Her blood was warm and sticky, her hand quickly became coated with it as she shuddered and gaped, tears pooling at the edge of her eyes. She clenched her teeth, her entire body shuddering with pain, and glared up at the Death Eater defiantly

The Death Eater loomed above her, his eyes sneering down at her from behind his mask. Casually, he raised his wand and practically purred out the next word.

“Crucio!”

Whatever pain Amanda had felt before was nothing compared to what she was subjected to now. She arched her back and fell into a little ball as her entire world became nothing but the piercing, white hot agony of the curse. She wanted it to end... the pain or her life... just let it end here... stop it...oh, it burned so badly...

Suddenly it was gone and Amanda gasped. Her throat was raw- she had probably been screaming- and when she coughed, blood dribbled from her lips. Her limbs were twitching and lingering pain wracked her body as Amanda curled up into a little ball and sobbed.

“You don’t like that, you little bitch, do you?” The Death Eater panted.

Amanda, still shuddering, gazed up at him with pain-filled eyes, which only made the look in his eyes grow brighter. He was getting off on this, Amanda thought dazedly, and suddenly a new fear entered her heart. What was he going to do to her? Her hands suddenly found wood, the tips of her fingers brushing against her fallen wand. The Death Eater took no notice as he took off his mask, revealing a grizzled and lecherous face.

“We’re going to have so much fun together, pretty girl,” he whispered softly. “Crucio!”

Pain overtook Amanda’s world once more. After that agonizing eternity, Amanda found herself gaping uselessly, a mixture of sobbing and crying as she mouthed words she couldn’t even comprehend.

The Death Eater shuddered, his eyes half-closing in ecstasy. Some part of Amanda wanted to give up, to concede right there and die. Let her suffering end! But the other part, the part that had survived Nicodemus, the part that Harry had molded from her, whispered thoughts into her ear. All of Amanda's pain and suffering suddenly became a roaring hatred, so dark and so deep that it overwhelmed anything else in her mind. She glared up at the man with nothing short of utter fury. Her hand, so close to her wand, twitched as she strained her muscles, her fingertip rolling over the wand, drawing it ever closer. As the Death Eater raised his wand, Amanda scrambled for her wand, clasped it in her hand and swung her arm up.

"I'm going to kill you!" she screamed, letting all of her rage and pain out into her voice. She had never felt this twisted need for revenge, but at that moment, she couldn't imagine anything else.

The man stiffened in surprise. Perhaps, if he had immediately reacted, he might have been able to stop her before she could let off her curse. But he didn't, so Amanda killed him.

Amanda screamed blindly, spitting out the incantation and pouring all of her hatred into her wand.

She had never performed this spell before, had only seen Harry do it a handful of times. She had never tried magic of this caliber before, but her rage demanded nothing less. The tip of her wand glowed with an ominous fiery light, growing brighter and brighter until it exploded outwards in a blazing wave of scorching power.

The Death Eater screamed in pure agony as pure, undiluted fiendfyre slammed into him, ripping through his half-formed shield with ease and ravaging his form. Cursed fire ate through cloth and flesh and his body sizzled as he staggered back, beating at himself with screams of panic and agony.

His death might have been a little quicker if he had left Amanda in a better state to cast spells, or if Amanda had been more skilled with the wand. Unfortunately for him, the half-formed cursed flame took over a minute to kill him as he collapsed to the ground, a screaming, shaking bonfire of burning human flesh.

Distantly, Amanda knew she was lying on cold ground and listening to a man burn to death under her wand. But apathy clouded her mind and suddenly she was very tired and very lonely. Tears streaked down her face and she turned over, away from the dying man, and curled up, her injured shoulder throbbing as blood oozed from the wound, over the floor and over her robes. As the fiendfyre crept from the dead man's carcass and started to eat away at the bookshelves and floor of the room, Amanda lay there unmoving, her mind in shock and pain.

Hermione and Ron were side-by-side as they sprinted down one of the corridors, their feet slapping loudly against the ground. Ron spun his head around, his eyes wide with terror as he spotted the burly Death Eater chasing after them.

"Expelliarmus!" Ron bellowed, swinging his wand desperately. The crimson bolt of light that blasted from his wand was easily deflected by the Death Eater.

"Run, Ron!" Hermione cried out. She flicked her wand out in front of her at a door. It smashed open with a powerful crash, almost flying off the hinges from the force of the spell. "Get inside!"

"Stop!" yelled the Death Eater, his voice full of frustration. Behind his mask, his eyes were furious and he raised his wand, spitting out the incantation for the Killing Curse angrily. "Avada Kedavra!"

Ron threw one last look at the Death Eater behind him, then hurled to the side and threw himself through the door. His vision was blinded by the bright green light of the killing curse that soared past him and he gasped, his nostrils suddenly filled with an unbearable stench of death and decay. He landed on the floor with a pained grunt, gagging and heaving as Hermione flicked her wand at the door.

"Colloporto!" She yelled. The door swung shut with a loud crash and the lock clicked. She turned around and stared down at Ron anxiously. "Are you alright?"

Ron had his hand to his mouth and without another word he turned his head and promptly threw up all over the ground. Hermione gave a cry of disgust and took a step backwards as Ron emptied the contents of his stomach, absently wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked up at Hermione and grinned sheepishly, fighting the urge to throw up again over the revolting smell in his nose.

"Honestly, Ron, that is disgusting!" Hermione said sharply, but she was frowning in concern. "Are you alright? Did he hit you with anything?"

"I'm alright," Ron said heavily, standing up and swaying for a moment. "I almost snorted up a Killing Curse, but I'm fine."

"Good," Hermione said briskly. She glanced back at the door and shuddered, the wand in her hand shaking. "I don't think that locking charm will..."

She was cut off as the door rattled loudly. There was muffled cursing on the other side, then something hard struck against the wood with a thunderous boom. Ron gulped and looked at Hermione nervously, who was slowly backing away.

"Come on, Ron!" She hissed urgently. "We have to go!"

"Right," Ron said grimly.

The two of them fled through the room and into another hallway, Hermione locking the door behind them as well. As they sprinted down this new corridor, Ron flinched when he heard a massive bang from behind them and knew without a doubt that the Death Eaters had broken through. He didn't look back again as they turned a sharp corner and entered the first door in a row of them. Hermione slammed it shut and locked it with a wave of her wand. Ron sighed in relief and turned around. Sudden movement caught his eye and with a yell of surprise, he raised his wand.

"Stupefy!" he barked.

"Protego!" His opponent yelled- no, sang back.

A silver shield shimmered into existence and deflected the red beam of light from his opponent's form. It ricocheted off one of the walls and crashed into a pile of scrolls lying on one of the desks. A second, quick spell from the other figure had Ron tap-dancing uncontrollably, his wand slipping out of his quivering fingers.

"Now, now, Ron," Luna said airily. She tucked her wand behind her hair and gave the redhead Weasley a luminous smile. "I know you must have thought I was a Blibbering Humdinger, but you really need to..."

"Luna!" Ron snapped. His voice sounded strangled as his arms crossed over his chest and his legs started kicking up into the air. "Undo this!"

"Oh, for heavens sake!" Hermione said crossly. "Finite Incantatum!"

Much to Ron's relief, he stopped dancing. Glaring at Luna, he picked up his wand and clutched it in his hand, muttering something nasty under his breath. Luna, for her part, merely smiled obliviously and shifted her vacant gaze to Hermione.

"Hello, Hermione," Luna said calmly. "How are you tonight?"

"Luna," Hermione said sharply. Her eyes flickered past the slim, blonde witch and she frowned in worry. "Where are Ginny, Neville and Amanda?"

Luna's normally vacant expression flashed with something like worry. "I don't know," she answered. "I saw Ginny and Neville running together, but I lost them. Amanda broke off when that awful woman chased after her. Then one of those awful Death Eater's chased after me but he was really slow," she paused and cocked her head thoughtfully. "Say, I wonder if he had been infected by Kolstiens? You see, they burrow into the thigh and latch on to..."

"Luna, this isn't the time for your ridiculous creatures!" Hermione hissed and Luna fell silent. "We need to find our friends and get out of here. We have to..."

“Hey, shut up!” Ron interrupted.

Hermione twitched and turned to glare at him, but he shushed her with a movement of his hand and listened closely. All three Fifth Years listened as somebody- a girl by the sound of it- screamed in the distant background. It was a fair distance away but they could all hear the absolute agony that was being projected.

“That’s...that’s Amanda,” Hermione breathed. Her eyes welled with tears and she placed a hand over her mouth.

Ron nodded, his face pale but grim. Even Luna was looking uncharacteristically somber as she stood there, listening to the agony of one of their best friends.

“We need to go save her,” Hermione blurted.

Ron nodded, looking pale. He paced up and down the room, growing more and more agitated as he thought. “Maybe that’s what they want,” he said suddenly. He shook his head and made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “They know that we’d go and make sure she’s alright, even if we knew it was a trap.”

The scream abruptly cut off and the three Fifth Years paused, glancing at each other with horror-filled gazes. Not another word was spoken as they crept out of the room with their wands high. Slowly, they began to trek down the corridors in the direction the scream had come from.

“Please don’t be dead,” Hermione whispered softly to herself.

Ron could only nod in agreement.

A/N: Thanks for DLP for the usual plot-critique and stuff. Without much ado, here's chapter 30.

In another part of the Department of Mysteries, there was a row of offices lining one of the corridors. In one of them, the sounds of chaotic fighting and shouting could barely be heard over the soft hum of a curiously-glowing magical pyramid that lay on the desk. Bits of scroll and parchment had been left there by whoever worked there. A small portrait hung on the wall, near a small bookcase, that showed a smiling woman cuddling a small baby to her bosom.

A large crack suddenly ripped through the wall, the bookshelf shuddered and a thunderous explosion tore through the room, picking up the desk and sending it hurling across the room. Amidst billowing clouds of dust and powdered stone came a figure. His left hand clutched a cane- an odd tool for someone as young as he was- while his right hand clutched his wand, where vestiges of wispy scarlet power clung stubbornly to the rune-covered wood.

"Man," grumbled Harry, a distinctly annoyed expression on his face. "You think they could make some more fucking doors to this place."

He poked his head out of the door and stared down the hallway, cocking his head and listening intently. In the distance, he could hear muffled crashes and bangs, accompanied by a fair amount of hollering. He sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Aw, shit," he muttered. He crossed the hallway and entered another office. "They've already gotten themselves in trouble. Still, the stupid brats seem to be putting up a fight."

'Maybe all of your efforts with the DA weren't in vain,' Meciél spoke into his mind. 'Still, they won't last long in direct combat. If you feel like saving them, I suggest you hurry.'

"Aren't you the one who's always harping on about keeping our promises?" Harry asked her shrewdly as he wandered down the corridor.

'All you promised to do is try,' Meciél said blandly.

Harry snickered as he approached a fork in the corridor. He frowned and braced himself as he raised his wand.

“Echosondra!”

An invisible ball of sonic energy left his wand, soaring down the corridor at great speed. It struck a wall and Harry winced as it shattered into a thousand different parts, ricocheting throughout the corridor as it bounced off walls, floors and ceilings. High-pitch bursts of sound, unable to be heard by anybody apart from Harry, struck the Denarian’s ear and with each tone came a tantalising flash, a grainy image of lines and darkness. Thousands of these tones left Harry with a clear picture of the physical layout of the corridor and adjoining rooms down that way.

“See anything?” Harry asked casually.

Instead of answering, an image flashed in his mind. Grainy and dark, like an old photograph, and full of odd lines and angles, Harry frowned.

“That bright wall there, is that fire?” He asked.

‘I believe so,’ Meciell answered. ‘Look at the ground.’

Harry did so and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. A human-size lump lay on the ground, its body too warped for it to be alive anymore. Nearby lay another human body, slimmer and curvier than the first.

“A girl. Too small to be an adult,” Harry muttered, turning down that hallway at a brisk pace. His eyes were sharp. “The girl and the man- probably a Death Eater- fought. The man died, probably taking the girl with him, since she’s not moving.”

‘Of the entire DA, who would stand up to a Death Eater and have a hope at succeeding?’ Meciell asked calmly.

"I know," Harry muttered grimly. He unconsciously stepped up his pace until he was jogging past the other offices until he reached the room that he wanted.

Fire was blazing on one side, licking at an already scorched carcass and slowly eating away at the office desk and shelf. The air was thick with smoke and very smell of it was enough for Harry to identify the spell that had made it.

"Fiendfyre," he muttered, whipping his wand up. He brought his mind to bear against the raging, almost uncontrollable flames, and concentrated as Meciél backed up his willpower.

The flames resisted but Harry squashed down the eager, mindless urge to burn and consume, and flicked his wand, forcing the cursed flame to dispel into nothingness. Another flick banished the smoke to the other side of the room, allowing Harry to get a good look at the body at his feet. He stared down with uncharacteristic wide eyes. It was Amanda, but he had a hard time picturing the blonde twit had had seen this morning to the pitiful sight before him now. Blood was pooling beneath her, emanating from a large, wicked slash in her arm.

'A Praecido curse,' Meciél noted analytically. 'Quite well cast, too, severing tendons to the arm. This was what probably disarmed her... not literally, of course.'

Amanda's face was pale and droplets of blood had stained her chin. Her light grey eyes were dull with shock and pain, barely aware of her surroundings, and her entire body seemed to be twitching at random intervals. Harry narrowed his eyes. He recognized these symptoms; they were the same ones he had after the Third Task. He knew what curse had been cast upon her and for the first time, he felt a stirring of pity in his chest.

"Oi," he said, nudging Amanda with his foot. He scowled. "Hey, get up!"

Amanda twitched but didn't move. Sighing, Harry bent down and inspected the wound carefully, lifting up a part of the blood-soaked robe with his wand and peering at the damage.

“Okay, this is going to sting a bit,” Harry said and raised his wand. A dim, red hue glowed at the tip and, using his left hand to hold Amanda to the ground, he pressed it against the wound.

Amanda let out a bloodcurdling scream and arched her back. Only Harry’s hand kept her from sitting up as he ran the glowing wand along the slash, his eyes narrowed in concentration. In a few moments he was done and he sat back, letting Amanda go and watching her as she let out a pained sob, her eyes wet with tears.

“Did I say that it would sting?” Harry asked, scratching his head and giving her a roguish grin. “What I meant to say was that it was going to hurt like hell. Still, all done now.”

Amanda’s hand trembled as she raised her head to look at her wounded shoulder. It was still covered in blood but a thick line of sizzling flesh had covered the cut. As she watched, steam hissed as it rose up into the air from her arm. She glanced at Harry with wide eyes, seemingly unable to speak.

Harry scowled. “You know, you could be a little more appreciative to the man who just stopped you from bleeding to death. A thank you would be nice.” He paused and smirked. “You could also lower your robe so I can see your breasts if you’re truly thankful.”

Amanda made a noise, it might have been a laugh or a sob, Harry wasn’t sure. Her arms flew up in the air, one of her hands latching onto Harry’s. Harry scowled as she latched onto it with a death-grip and she spoke for the first time.

“He hurt me,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. Harry frowned in sympathy; she had probably screamed it raw. “He hurt me and I killed him.”

“Cool,” Harry said brightly. “There’s nothing like a bit of revenge to set things straight. Nice Fiendfyre, by the way. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

"I didn't mean to..." Amanda started. She paused. Guilt and self-loathing coloured her voice. "Yes, I did. I meant to kill. I wanted him to suffer!" She turned her haunted eyes upon Harry, who stared back impassively. "I wanted him to burn!"

Harry glanced at the rapidly-cooling body behind him.

"Good job," he said.

She was still holding his hand, so he stood and pulled her up. Amanda grunted in pain but staggered up, still keeping her grip on Harry.

"I killed him," she said dully and Harry sighed. "I kill a man, a human being. Will they put me in jail? Will I go to Azkaban? Will they execute me?"

A resounding crack filled the air as Harry slapped her across the face, none-too-gently. She swallowed and stared at him in shock, her mouth agape.

"We don't have time for your pathetic whining," Harry said coldly. His tone was belied by his actions as he reached up and brushed her hair away from her eyes with a startling tenderness. "Snap out of it and get over it, you stupid blonde. If you wanna bitch about it, wait until you're out of here."

"I..." Amanda started, and then stopped. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, Harry saw determination and hard resolve. "Thanks."

"Not a problem," Harry said cheerfully, letting go of her hand and taking a step back. He grinned. "Hey, I'm always more than happy to slap you across the face."

Amanda let out a weak laugh, shaking her head and brushing her bloodied hair out of her tear-soaked eyes.

"You never change," she giggled softly, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"Hell no," Harry swore. He flicked his wand and banished Amanda's wand into her left hand, the unhurt one. The right arm hang limp by her side, unmoving. "If I changed, that would mean that God had won and seriously, I wouldn't be able to take Meciél's whining."

He strode out of the destroyed office, glancing up and down the corridor with speculative eyes, while making sure that Amanda was able to follow.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go...that way."

He pointed to the right and Amanda nodded.

"Is that where everybody else is?" she asked weakly.

"Think so," Harry grunted. "I'm lost, so it's all up to chance, really."

"You're lost?" Amanda asked in surprise. "How'd you find me then?"

"Luck?" Harry offered. The cane he had strapped to his back briefly shuddered and he scowled. "Come on," he growled to Amanda, suddenly feeling disgruntled. "Let's go save your stupid friends, so I can take them back to Hogwarts and kill them myself."

Amanda was, surprisingly, not in as much pain as she thought she'd be. Sure, her shoulder ached and Harry's crude healing methods throbbed, but most of her was surprisingly numb. Some part of her was disbelieving, for something that hurt as much as the Cruciatus Curse should leave some kind of mark on her somewhere. There was no way that the pain she had felt was all in her head, it wasn't possible. Another part of her wondered curiously if the numbness was a part of Harry's spell or if she was simply in shock. The larger part of her, however, was simply glad that it was gone. She would prefer uncomfortable numbness to pain of that level at any day.

"Oh, come on!" Harry snapped in irritation as the two of them turned a corner, only to come face to face with a dead-end. "What the hell is wrong with this place?" He raised his wand, giving it a flick with an odd twist of his wrist at the end. "Cornollivo!"

Amanda, who had unconsciously drawn to him, flinched as Harry's body buckled under the force of the spell. An eerie screeching noise struck her ears and she winced, while a spinning streak of darkish-brown magic burst from the end of the Denarian's wand. Amanda watched with wide eyes as it slammed into the wall, drilling through stone and brick with ease. In a few seconds, it had brought the entire wall down with a loud roar. Broken bits of stone fell to the ground in a shower of dust and debris and the ground shuddered.

"Alright," Harry muttered, casually banishing away the powdered rock that lingered in the air so that it clung to the roof- and hence, was out of his eyes. "I think it's this way."

"How can you be sure?" Amanda asked quietly, following him without question. At the moment, there was nobody else she would rather have by her side- except, perhaps, her Father or Professor Dumbledore.

"If your ears were as big as your breasts then you'd notice that all the noise is coming from that way," Harry said lazily, gesturing forward. He scratched his head idly and smiled as Amanda rolled her eyes. "Besides, I'm pretty sure that these walls are supposed to be doors. The security alarm might have been triggered or something."

"Alright," Amanda said softly, and said nothing else as she followed Harry down another one of the drab, never-ending corridors.

They went that way for a few more minutes, before Harry stopped and cocked his head. "Oh yeah," he said, gleefully rubbing his hands together. "We're getting close to where it all started. Hopefully I'll get the chance to run into a few Death Eaters."

"Why would..." Amanda started. She closed her mouth and stared at Harry curiously as he stopped moving and stiffened. She grimaced as he stood there, her hand absently lingering over her shoulder wound, and waited for him to do something.

"Amanda," Harry said calmly. "Why don't you go on ahead a bit? I'll catch up with you later."

“What?” Amanda gaped, her eyes wide with surprise. “You want me to go ahead alone?”

“Amanda,” Harry said between gritted teeth, a little less calmly than before. Amanda noticed that his fingers were clenching around his wand and that his muscles tightened around his shoulders and neck. “You really should do what I tell you to do. Go on ahead.” A dark sneer crossed his face. “You’re not going to want to be here for this.”

Amanda gulped and glanced around. She couldn’t see anything in the hallway except for closed doors. She frowned and turned back to Harry, her mouth opening to argue with him again when she noticed something. The cane on his back, which Amanda knew held the Sword of the Cross, was shuddering ever-so-slightly. Dread flashed through her, for she knew what that meant.

“Okay,” she said softly. She licked her lips nervously and gave Harry a weak smile. “Don’t be too long.”

“Oh, I dunno,” Harry said casually, something glittering in his eyes. “I like playing with my prey.”

Amanda turned around and fled down the corridor without another word, leaving Harry alone to battle with whatever creatures lurked in the darkness behind her.

Harry waited until the last of Amanda’s blonde hair disappeared into the darkened corridor before him, before he turned around with a dark smile curving his lips. The sword was shuddering on his back, and had picked up the presence of enemies just a split-second before Meciél.

“Have you come for my blood, Denarians?” Harry called out mockingly. He took a step forward, his eyes narrowed as he glanced over the sets of doors on either side of him. “You can come out now. I know you’re here.”

Two of the doors exploded outwards and Harry ducked as their shattered remains soared over his head, slamming into the walls opposite them and splintering into ruined piles of wood. Harry stood up again, his eyes focused on the creatures that stood before him. There were two of them, one standing in each doorway.

The first seemed to be a cross between a lobster and a gorilla, with a large shaggy coat of fur, two large pincers which clicked at him menacingly and dark, squinting eyes that boiled with an ancient evil. As well as the glowing sigil that burned brightly on its forehead, another sigil had been branded upon the Denarian's bestial chest-one that Harry recognized as belonging to Vesper. The other Denarian was an ant. Granted, it was the size of a horse, and its black exoskeleton gleamed in the light of the torches that lined the walls, but it was still an ant. Still, this ant had mandibles that looked like it could cut a car in half without much effort. Apart from its personal sigil, it also had a glowing sigil branded on its armour.

"Verrine and Sammerial," Harry greeted casually, eying them down without a hint of fear.

Sammerial, the Lobirilla (which Harry decided summed it Sammerial's form quite nicely) growled under its breath and pawed at the air with its large pincers. There was madness in his eyes- Harry knew that this Fallen had been one of the first to go mad in the void. Verrine, on the other hand, had most of her mental capabilities and had always been one of Vesper's lackeys since the beginning.

"You know, Verrine, it's a pity that you transformed so early," Harry said glumly. "Meciel's shown me what you look like and, damn, I say in all honesty that I would jump at the chance to lick whipped cream off your creamy breasts. Say, why don't we ditch psycho-ape over there and go and find a dark room to get better acquainted?"

Verrine clicked her mandibles furiously. The sound might have been a signal to attack, or Sammerial might have simply grown impatient. Either way, the lobster-like gorilla gave a bellowing roar of hatred and jumped forward.

For a large creature, he jumped surprisingly high, his scraping against the ceiling, and he landed where Harry had been standing just a moment beforehand. The ground shuddered and cracked and Harry, who had jumped back at the last second, eyed Sammerial with a little bit more respect. The insane Fallen's form obviously had superior physical strength.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry hissed, his pleasant expression gone. His face was twisted up in rage as a blast of green light shot from his wand, invisible winds howling in protest.

Sammerial moved faster than his bulk would suggest, throwing himself sideways and into one of the walls. The Killing Curse soared past him as the wall crumbled and the Fallen fell through. Harry ignored him and swung around, just in time to see Verrine rushing madly towards him.

"Contego Puniceus!" Harry summoned at the last moment. Hellfire warped around the tip of his wand, extending out into a burning dome of dark fire that surrounded him not a moment too soon.

Verrine slammed into him with incredible force, more than enough to topple over a large semi-trailer. The magic around Harry flared as he winced, his entire body struck with painful throbbing. The force of the blow threw him backwards- far backwards- and he soared through the air. His fall was cushioned by his shield as he tumbled and rolled along the ground, a dozen meters away from where he had been standing. His wand fell from his hand and clattered along the ground.

'Shit! She hits like a fucking tank!' Harry mentally groaned.

He turned his head and his eyes widened as he saw Verrine scuttling towards him, the tips of her legs cracking ground and walls. In a second, the large ant-creature was all over him. Her lower limbs trapped his legs and Harry saw red as she reared back, clicking madly with her mandibles as she brought her forwards legs down on his face.

Amanda shuddered when she heard the unholy roar behind her and hurried her pace, limping down the corridors as fast as she could.

Her wounds were throbbing madly and she had to bite her lip from crying out loud as she turned a corner. Doubt plagued her mind and she hesitated, glancing back into the darkened hallway. Here she was, running for her life, and Harry was back there fighting who-knows-what by himself. What kind of person was she to run and leave a friend behind like that? But, in all honesty, what else could she do? The encounter with the Death Eater had quickly dispelled any illusions she might have had of her own power and skill. Sure, she was better than anybody else in the DA, probably anybody else in the entire school barring Harry himself, but that didn't mean she was up for a fight with real Denarians.

She sighed and staggered forward, her left hand holding onto her wand clumsily. In her state, she wasn't sure how well she'd fare against any Death Eater she found. She needed to find help. Maybe, if she found her friends, they could contact Dumbledore somehow. Ron and Ginny had clued her in on the 'Order' that their parents were a part of. Maybe they'd be able to help as well? Of course, she needed to find everybody first, but in these twisting corridors they could be anywhere!

"Amanda!" Somebody yelled.

Amanda jerked and spun around. Her mouth dropped open with surprise as she saw Ron, Hermione and Luna running towards her.

"Amanda!" Hermione called out, her cheeks red with exertion. She stopped a few steps away and appraised her friend with a horrified expression. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"A Death Eater caught up with me, but I'm fine," Amanda said, with a weak smile. "Are you alright?"

"They didn't catch us," Ron said grimly. He looked at Amanda's shoulder with pale cheeks. At another time, in another face, the sight of tantalising bare skin under her torn and ripped robes would have made him blush, but the large amount of blood and blistering skin put a dampener on those thoughts.

"You don't look well," Luna observed quietly.

"Where's Neville and Ginny?" Amanda asked urgently.

"We don't know," Hermione answered quietly.

Amanda nodded grimly, and then instinctively flinched as a loud crashing noise exploded from the corridor behind her. She turned her head and peered through the darkness, trying to see what had happened. The others did the same, oblivious to the battle that was raging behind them.

"What's that?" Hermione asked fearfully.

"Harry," Amanda answered seriously.

"He's here?" Ron breathed in hope.

"He came to save us," Amanda mumbled. "We...we don't want to go down that way. We can't face what he's fighting. We have to go this way instead," she gestured down the corridor, back to where Hermione, Ron and Luna had last seen the Death Eaters.

"What could be that powerful?" Hermione asked her voice tinged with disbelief.

"It doesn't matter," Amanda dismissed uncomfortably.

"Alright," Ron decided after a moment. "We'll go back down that way. We'll find Ginny and Neville and we'll get out of here."

The group began to trot down the corridor. Hermione moved closer to Amanda and asked quietly, "Who's Potter fighting against anyway?"

"Demons," was all Amanda said.

A line of blood trickled down Harry's forehead as one of Verrine's thick, black-plated legs dug between his eyes. Harry took a deep breath, glaring up at Verrine with fury. The only thing stopping the other Denarian from putting a leg right through his brain was an ashen wing of bone, extending from his back and pressing up against

her leg with all of his might. The other wing had trapped the other frontal leg to the ground and for a split second, the two Denarians strained against each other in a contest of pure physical strength.

“You...bitch!” Harry hissed.

Harry flexed his fingers, Hellfire roaring through his veins in a chaotic rush of barely controllable power. Channelling magic without his wand was more strenuous and wasteful, but in this case he had no choice. A bright light shone out from between his fingers as he gathered pure, liquid Hellfire into his palms. With a grunt of effort, Harry strained his arms as he reached up and slammed his glowing palms against Verrine’s underbelly.

There was a powerful flash of sulphur reeked through the air, enough to snuff the life out of a small creature. Verrine let out a series of mad clicks as the power of the blow literally lifted her and blasted all two-tons of her off Harry’s chest and into one of the walls. It was blasted apart as Verrine fell into the room behind it, allowing Harry ample time to stagger up and wordlessly summon his wand to his fingers.

The Lobirilla roared in fury, clambering through the hole it had created and fixing Harry with its squinted gaze. It charged at him in a series of jumps, each jump leaving a small crater and cracked stone on the ground. It raised its pincer-fist and slammed it down at Harry. Harry stared the Lobirilla down coldly and reached behind him to pull out the Sword of the Cross. With a blur of silver flame, Harry brought the glowing katana in front of him, ignoring the way his gloved hands started to heat up under the revolting holy flame. The Lobirilla’s pincer snapped shut on the sword with a resounding crack and Sammerial paused, his squinty-eyes widening with unmistakable horror.

Taking a huge breath, the deranged Fallen let out an agonising scream. The flame from the sword grew brighter and brighter until Sammerial let go of it, his furry pincer sizzling and blackened. The beast staggered back, shaking its head madly and letting out another bellowing roar of anger.

"Laedo Fervefacio!" Harry snarled, bringing his wand up and brandishing it like a whip.

From the tip of his wand came a blazing whip of dark flame, which lashed across Sammerial's chest and drove him back another few paces. As the whip coiled back, Harry twisted his wand back and the flame became a rearing serpent, which curled around Harry and rushed at the re-emerging Verrine. It slammed into her and sent her scuttling along the ground, pushing her back through another wall until it dissipated with a puff of smoke.

"Skruthla-tuf!" Sammerial snarled.

Harry's eyes wide as the Lobirilla extended its pincers and gave him what was unmistakably a nasty grin. He grunted in pain as two blinding arcs of crimson light splashed out at him, searing through stone and vaporising one of the torches that lined the walls. Although Harry deflected most of the spell away from him with the sword, the silver flame easily negating the conjured liquid, some of it splashed against his chest. It instantly ate through his robes and started to sizzle into his flesh. Harry resisted the urge to double over as he squared his shoulders. With a sudden flash of fury, he levelled his wand at Sammerial and snarled, "Crucio!"

Sammerial roared in agony and collapsed, his massive arms punching out in a vain attempt to strike at Harry. They tore through the walls, rapidly widening the narrow corridor, and ripped through the ground. Harry smiled thinly, glancing down at his chest to see that Meciel was already combating the effects of the acid and his skin was already knitting back together.

"I'm impressed," said Harry, his wand trained on Sammerial. He kept an eye out for Verrine, who had disappeared from view. The Cruciatus Curse flowed through him in a blazing desire to inflict terrible pain upon his opponent, lancing out of his wand and sending a feared demon to his knees. "To be able to cast magic in your demonic form is pretty impressive."

Sammerial let out another roar of agony and slammed his fists into the ground uselessly. A thick trickle of blood was beginning to gush

out of his nostrils and ears. The ground shuddered as Sammerial smashed his giant pincers in the ground again. However, it kept shuddering and Harry widened his eyes as Meciel's enhanced control over his senses told him to move.

"Shit!" Harry cursed and jumped to the side, just as the ground below him exploded in a geyser of stone and dirt.

He stumbled as the ground became fine sand and lost his footing, landing unceremoniously on his arse. He whipped his wand up, particles of sand whipping up into the air as an Effodio blasted forward with a crack. The hazy black figure of Verrine sunk back into the large sandpit. Harry paused, his eyes narrowed carefully. He staggered back up to his feet with some difficulty and, after seeing that Sammerial was still out of commission, watched for Verrine's next move.

It didn't take long. The first thing Harry noticed was that the sand was moving, ever so slightly. He frowned, ankle-deep in the sand as he was, as large rifts of it slowly began to creep to the centre of the hole. Suddenly he yelped in shock as something yanked at his ankle. His wings shot out and slammed into the wall behind him, digging in deep and anchoring on the stone, as the pit of sand became a whirling sinkhole of sand. Bits of broken rock and other debris were sucked into the hole.

Harry gritted his teeth as the tugging on his ankle became more and more intense. He thrust his bone wings deeper into the wall and slammed the Sword of the Cross into the sinkhole, hoping that it might negate the spell. Unfortunately for him, it didn't work.

"Any ideas?" He growled out loud, taking the sword out of the sand lest it be taken away. A fierce wind had emerged, a howling gale that shot little bits of stinging sand at Harry's face.

'Much like you specialise with fire-based spells, Verrine is very proficient with earth-based magics,' Meciel told him grimly.

"No shit!" Harry snarled. "Of course she does. She's a fucking ant! What I need now are ways to not get sucked down the sinkhole!"

'Don't let go,' Meciél advised.

"Don't let go," Harry mimicked roughly. "What a fantastic idea! I never would have...whoa!"

His wings, which had been lodged in the wall, had finally driven through the relatively weaker stone. For a split-second, Harry was being tugged forward and under into the pit of whirling sand. Instinct took over and he lifted up the sword and slammed it into the hard ground beneath the wall. It lodged there and Harry held onto the end with dear life, his fingers straining to clasp the hilt.

"This is bad," Harry growled. He glanced over his shoulder with a furious expression on his face. He didn't know what would happen when he reached the bottom of the pit. Chances were, he could probably survive it, but Harry wasn't a big fan of chance and was quite happy clinging to the sword.

'I have an idea,' Meciél said quickly. 'Tell me, what happens to sand when you apply enough heat to it?'

"It becomes glass," Harry said with dawning realisation.

Taking a deep breath, the sand stinging at his cheeks, Harry let go of the sword and allowed the sinkhole to pull him in. He was yanked by the ankle and thrown around by the currents, which were spiralling ever so closer to the centre. His wand hand rose up even as his head was submerged by sand and Hellfire roared furiously through his wand, the runes glowing with a blazing light. Fire roared from the tip of his wand, shooting up and lashing out at the sand. The heat was intense; enough to make even Harry feel uncomfortable as powerful conjured flames ripped into the currents that made the sinkhole so effective.

To be exact, the sand didn't exactly turn into glass. But Harry's flame was hot enough to start solidifying the sand and dirt particles in something approaching molten rock. Slowly, as more and more of the sand was struck at and relatively solidified, the currents began to weaken. It was enough for Harry to use the enhanced strength of his

wings to boost himself out of the sinkhole and clamber for hard ground. He sunk to his hands and knees, taking deep breaths and spitting out a mouthful of sand. Behind him, the sinkhole had become overrun by glowing molten rock as Harry's flame continue to rip through the sand, sending off a wave of intense heat.

A shadow cast over Harry and he glanced up, only to see that Sammerial loomed above him, grinning down at him with his bestial face and squinted eyes. Harry narrowed his eyes and Sammerial raised a pincer. Harry rolled over just in time as the other Fallen slammed it down on the ground where he had been kneeling a moment ago. The ground cracked and Sammerial raised his pincers again, attempting to crush Harry with them again and again. Harry rolled and dodged as best he could, although one of the pincers came close enough to cleave him painfully on his left arm. Blood splattered across the ground.

He was finally able to bring his wand up as Sammerial slammed his pincer down again. The air hissed and crackled and Sammerial paused, staring down into Harry's boiling emerald gaze. His wand, a small piece of wood, was glowing at the runes as it held back a pincer that would have crumpled a car.

"Pathetic!" Harry hissed menacingly. "You couldn't even kill me when I was distracted. That's going to cost you your life. Cruento Adustum!"

Harry's spilt blood, both trickling down his arm and on the ground, glowed brightly as dark magic twisted it into a raging maelstrom of power. Harry glared coldly at Sammerial for the last time as the glowing crimson bloodfire whipped up and splashed against the Denarian creature with an odd buzzing ping.

Sammerial screamed in agony as it closed over his face and jerked back, pawing at his head with his giant pincers. Harry staggered up as Sammerial backed away, shaking his head frantically. The smell of burning flesh filled the air as the bloodfire ate away at the Denarian's head, attacking the eyes and seeping into the skull. Perhaps it was best for Sammerial that he lost his vision. In his mad haste and panic, he backed into the sinkhole of molten rock and toppled over. Harry watched with vindictive pleasure as Sammerial let out the loudest,

most agonising scream he had ever heard. Steam and smoke billowed up as Sammerial sank below the molten rock, his hand twitching one last time before it was submerged and he was killed.

“Praecido!” Harry muttered coldly.

He poured in a torrent of Hellfire to boost the spell's power and an almost-blinding arc of silver light blasted from the end of his wand, disappearing into the clouds of smoke that hovered above the sinkhole and beyond. There was a piercing scream from the other end and Harry gave a faint smile. He banished away the smoke so that it covered the roof, allowing him full view of the other Denarian that had escaped him.

Verrine had transformed back from her demonic form, most likely to cast the complicated bit of magic Harry had just been a victim of. Her human form was very beautiful, a dark-haired woman in her thirties dressed in a revealing, low-cut blouse. At the moment, she was gurgling up blood and shuddering madly as she crumpled to the ground. Harry's spell had ripped through her frail body viciously, the arc severing one of her arms and giving her a critical, if not fatal, blow to the chest. She lay there on the other side of the sinkhole, her light-blue eyes staring blankly up at the ceiling as she tried to initiate her own Denarian regeneration powers on her wounds.

Unlike Harry's arm, which was healing up quite nicely now, her wounds would take a lot longer- if she didn't die first.

Harry redirected his gaze into the sinkhole, which was rapidly collapsing on itself in a gigantic pile of molten rock and heated sand. He frowned and raised his wand, muttering “Accio coin,” and waiting to see if anything would happen.

‘Did you honestly expect that you could summon a blackened denarius with a spell like that?’ Meciell asked amusedly.

“Ah well,” Harry said, shrugging carelessly. “He's nothing more than a weak psychopath anyway. I'll grab it the next time we meet.”

He turned to the bloodied woman and regarded her thoughtfully.

“That was a good fight,” he called out. He casually walked over the sinkhole, ripping out the Sword of the Cross from the ground and laying it casually against his shoulder. “It was even fun, challenging in an entirely different way. For that, I’ll leave you alone.”

Verrine shifted her head, staring at Harry with glazed over eyes.

“If you can move, then crawl your way out of here and leave. If you can’t, then stay there and die,” Harry said callously. “Either way, I don’t give a shit. You’re finished.”

He spun around and it looked as if he would step off, when he paused and sighed.

“Yeah, I know how incredibly bad-arse that sounds, but I’m afraid it’s all bull,” he confided. A dark gleam entered his eyes as he raised his wand. “But frankly, leaving an enemy alive after a battle purely because of my own superior feelings is a cliché that not even I’ve fallen into yet. So, I have two words for you now. Avada Ked...”

Harry’s words died on his lips as Verrine disappeared without a sound. He stared at the patch of blood on the other side of the sinkhole and scowled, muttering darkly under his breath and shoving his wand into his robes.

‘That’s what you get for bragging,’ Meciél said dismissively.

“Come on, I sounded cool,” Harry protested loudly.

He gave the hallway a quick glance-over, then paused and lifted his head. He could still hear the sounds of fighting going on in the other parts of the Department of Mysteries. He grunted and strode down to the end of the corridor, glancing left and right.

“Shit, it’s a bloody maze! Screw this! We’ll do it my way. Cornollivo!”

A/N:

"This way!" Ron hollered above the din around him. Luna nodded and disappeared through the door in a whirl of blonde hair and robes. He took a step forward and brandished his wand at the other doorway, bellowing, "Stupefy!"

The blast of red light slammed into the doorframe, making one of the masked Death Eaters recoil in surprise. Seeing the perfect opportunity, Amanda waved her wand weakly, hissing softly as every movement sent jolts of pain down her wounded arm.

"Abhorreo!" she cried.

A streak of electric-blue light zapped forward and struck the stumbling Death Eater on the chest. He cried in pain, his entire body trembling, and fell back to the ground, his wand clattering uselessly from his hand. Amanda and Ron shared a quick grin, before the red-haired Gryffindor hoisted her up by her good shoulder and helped her walk to the next room where Luna and Hermione were taking the chance to catch their breaths.

The two girls looked up, their wands reflexively rising up to point at them. Ron waved them down tiredly and set Amanda down by one of the small office chairs. She sank down in the seat gratefully and closed her eyes, letting the urgent mutterings of the group around her fill her head.

"This should hold them," Hermione finished in satisfaction. Amanda heard the door slam shut behind her, and the lock clicked. She tried to suppress a bitter laugh. If the Death Eaters had even a quarter of the skill Harry did, then a locked door wasn't going to stop them for long.

"...We can't stay here," Ron was saying nervously. Amanda could picture him looking back at the door with a pale, yet determined face. "I need to find Ginny. I can't leave her out there by herself, not with the Death Eaters."

Amanda's mind wandered off, allowing them to decide what they would do next. Her arm was beginning to ache to the point where it was all she could do was to grit her teeth and try not to scream. They had wandered into another series of long corridors and empty offices. With the amount of dust Amanda had seen in some of them, she was convinced that some, if not most, of them were for nothing but show. They had only encountered one Death Eater so far, the one that she had just subdued, and he had seemed as lost as they were.

"Amanda?" somebody called her name softly. Amanda opened her eyes and focussed them on Hermione's anxious face. "We're going."

"Oh, okay then," she said quietly. She winced as she stood up, not missing the way Hermione and Ron shot each other worried looks. Even Luna looked subdued, staring down at Amanda's wound and biting her lip worriedly.

They traversed through the corridors once more, using the occasional 'Point Me' charm at the forks. Ron was convinced that the atrium was north of the elevator (because the giant wizard statue always points south and it was pointing at the elevator, he argued). Amanda for her part, limped her way with them, and it seemed to be working. The corridors were becoming longer and longer, and the few offices that Amanda saw seemed to be regularly used and maintained.

After another few minutes of walking, they all heard a distant crash and shouting voices. They paused, Amanda lifting her head with a sudden strength that she hadn't known she still had left.

"Doesn't that sound like Neville?" Ron asked quietly.

"I think so," Hermione answered softly.

They stood there until Luna smiled brightly and skipped forward, twirling her wand between her fingers. She flashed them a wide grin and said, in her peculiar singsong voice, "Come on then! Let's go see our friend!"

“Luna!” Hermione snapped harshly. “We need a plan...” She trailed off as Luna disappeared down the corridor with flapping robes and harrumphed. “Honestly,” she muttered, but she was quick to follow.

Amanda kept up as best she could as they rounded a corner and came across a sturdy black-painted door. It seemed a little bit different from the other one’s they had seen before, but she wasn’t given any chance to point it out when Ron gave a strangled yell from behind her.

“They’re coming!” he yelled, raising his wand. An awkward Protego deflected the first spell, but it left him reeling. “Open the door!”

Hermione darted forward, her wand tapping against the lock as she muttered a spell under her breath. The door clicked and opened up with a loud creak. Luna, Hermione and Amanda spilled in, only to stop short with surprise.

They were in a large amphitheatre of some kind, with long stone benches surrounding a dais in the centre of the room. On the dais was a cracked, stone arch- large enough for an average adult to walk through comfortably. A black, tattered curtain fluttered against the arch, and for a moment Amanda was certain that she could hear strange whisperings from it. However, she ignored them in favour of the group of figures standing near the centre of the room, all who looked up at them in surprise, and her mouth went dry.

Neville, bleeding from a cut on his head, was clutching the glowing orb in his hands, his wand pressed against it in a clearly threatening gesture. He was breathing heavily, but his eyes were furious as he glared at the Death Eaters in front of him with nothing short of pure hatred.

The Death Eater witch, Bellatrix, had her wand trained on Neville, a rabid look plastered across her face. The tall Death Eater with grey eyes stood at her side. Both of them stared up at the other group with stunned surprise, allowing Amanda to raise her wand.

“Effodio!” she yelled grimly.

A blast echoed in the vast room, akin to a gunshot or a backfiring car, and Bellatrix shrieked as a silver flash pulverised a hole into one of the stone benches close to her. She moved as if to return a curse, but the other Death Eater grabbed her arm and gestured at Neville, saying something to inaudible for Amanda to hear.

“Ron!” Hermione screamed and Amanda whirled around as fast as she could, just in time to see Ron’s body tumble down the steps. She glared up at the doorway as five- no, seven, Death Eaters stalked through, silent and graceful in their obscuring robes and masks.

Hermione, Luna and Amanda were pressed down the stairs as the Death Eaters loomed towards them, until they were back-to-back with Neville. Ron lay on the ground nearby, one of his arms at an odd angle and his body shaking as if it was desperately trying to move. Amanda focussed on the Death Eaters, her wand clutched tightly in her hands.

“You little bitches!” one of the Death Eaters hissed. He was clutching his chest and looking decidedly worse for wear, so Amanda concluded that he must have been the one she had struck with the Percussion Curse.

“Enough, Jugson,” the tall Death Eater said in a bored tone. He scanned the Death Eaters and Amanda could tell that he was frowning behind his mask. “Where are the others?”

“There are still a couple of stragglers,” a thick, burly man responded roughly. “But Rowle is dead, burnt to a crisp by cursed flame.”

There were uneasy mutterings as the tall Death Eater blinked in surprise.

“Are you sure it was Fiendfyre?” he demanded.

“Positive,” the burly Death Eater answered grimly. “What’s more, the caster was able to extinguish it. There aren’t many wizards who can do that.”

"Potter's already here, then," one of the other Death Eaters said shakily. He glanced over his shoulder fearfully, as if Harry was likely to jump out of the shadows at him. "I'm not going against that- whatever he is!"

"You coward!" hissed Bellatrix, her eyes alight with maniacal flame. "You dare flee in the service of the Dark Lord?"

"Hey, you weren't there in the graveyard!" the Death Eater shouted. "You didn't see what he could do, and how many he killed. He took out Gibbon and Yaxley, for Merlin's sake!"

"Our special 'guests' were sent here to take care of him," a short, stumpy Death Eater muttered. "Let them deal with him."

"He'll take you all out," Amanda cut in, managing a weak but dangerous smile. "He's already killed the demons that you sent after him," she bluffed. "And he'll come and kill you too, unless you leave now and never come back!"

"Why, you little bitch!" Bellatrix screeched. She raised her wand threateningly, an insane smile coming over her face. "It looks like itty-bitty blondie needs a lesson in how to act before her betters!"

"That's enough," the tall Death Eater intervened, his grey eyes watching Amanda shrewdly. "We have a mission to accomplish." He turned back to Neville and held out his hand. "What will it be, boy? Will it be your life- and the lives of your friends- or the orb? We can take it now, or we can take it from amidst the bodies of you and your friends. Choose now."

Neville was shaking, his hands clasped around the orb as tight as possible. They all watched him, Amanda and the DA apprehensively and the Death Eaters carefully. An ominous silence fell upon them as they waited for Neville to respond.

"Give us the orb!" Bellatrix suddenly screeched loudly.

Neville started in shock, but it had been enough to break him out of his stupor. Slowly, with trembling hands, he held the orb out and made to place in the Death Eater's hands.

"Yes, yes, that's a good boy," the Death Eater muttered, his eyes shining greedily.

Suddenly one of the doors surrounding the edge of the amphitheatre exploded. The Death Eaters' heads darted upwards as adult wizards and witches stormed in. Amanda recognised few of the faces but Hermione let out an audible sigh of relief, whispering "The Order!"

"Get them!" somebody yelled, and Amanda picked out Professor Moody?

The scarred Auror grinned as he surged forward, moving faster than a cripple should, and lifted his wooden leg. With a deft kick, the wooden peg slammed into one of the outer Death Eater's chest. A bright flash emanated from the wooden peg and the Death Eater soared through the air, across the amphitheatre and into the wall on the other side.

"Ventosus!" Amanda screamed, raising her wand and brandishing it wildly.

Gusts of wind were summoned around her, whipping up the Death Eaters robes and hoods and making them flap uncontrollably. She grabbed Neville's hand as the Death Eaters around them were distracted and pulled him forward under one of the stone benches. Hermione did the same for Luna as four wizards jumped up to the dais and began to duel with the Death Eaters at a fast, frantic pace that the schoolchildren could only feel envy for.

The battle began to rage once more.

Ginny Weasley crept through the doorway, her own breathing sounding loud in her ears. Her eyes were wide and barely controlled panic had flooded her features. Nonetheless, she gripped her wand with determination and tried to be as quiet as possible as she slunk through the long, rectangular room. Lamps hung low from the ceiling,

suspended in the air by golden chains. Apart from a few desks and chairs, the only interesting thing was in the centre of the room: a huge tank full of glowing green water. She tried not to get too distracted as she tip-toed to the other side of the room, but sudden movement at the corner of her eye made her whirl around.

“W-Who’s there?” Ginny hissed quietly. She gave a threatening flick of her wand, a few violent sparks spluttering out.

Movement caught her eye again and Ginny turned, facing the tank with confusion. She was positive that she had seen something move inside the water. Was there something alive in there? She unconsciously moved closer, staring deep into the tank until her nose was pressed against the glass. For a few moments, nothing happened. Just as Ginny was about to move, something darted through the water and slammed into the glass right in front of her face.

Ginny shrieked and clambered backwards, fright flooding her veins. The large grey object, she realised later, was...was it a brain? It certainly looked like one. Ginny watched with fascination as it propelled itself through the water using its brainstem, swimming with an ease more suited to a squid.

“You scared me,” Ginny said weakly. She shook her red mane and turned around with an impatient sigh. She stopped short and froze in terror.

A Death Eater, no doubt lured in by Ginny’s scream, stood at the door. For a moment, the two wand-wielders stared each other down. Suddenly, Ginny took off, turning around and darting around the giant tank to the door on the other side of the room.

“Frendo!” the Death Eater bellowed.

A rather weakish streak of light exploded from the tip of his wand, striking the giant tank and exploding. Glass shattered and Ginny screamed as a tidal wave of green water rushed out to meet her. The Death Eater was skilled enough to part the water with his wand, while Ginny was lifted up and swept down the hall. Something slimy

touched her arm and the red-haired witch recoiled, snatching her hand back.

She slammed into the wall rather painfully but shook it off and jumped to her feet. She brandished her wand over her shoulder, shouting out the incantation to the bat-bogey charm, before blasting the door off its hinges with a well-placed reducto and fleeing through it as fast as she could.

A flash of scarlet light rocketed past her shoulder, splashing on the wall of the narrow corridor in a shower of red sparks. Ginny ducked and weaved as best she could as she jumped through the nearest doorway.

This continued on for the next few minutes as Ginny traversed through the long corridors of the Department of Mysteries. Had she been there in more pleasant circumstances, she would have marvelled at some of the things she saw. However, the one time she stopped to gawk at a dark room with the giant, floating planets, the Death Eater had caught up with her and she'd been forced to throw Jupiter at him to get away. The more she ran the closer and closer she got to the loud sounds of fighting, but that was her intention, really. There was safety in numbers, she reasoned, and together they should be able to hold off the Death Eaters until help arrived.

Of course, that was presuming somebody knew that they were in trouble. Ginny distantly recalled Amanda sending a letter to Potter but knowing him, he'd probably have ripped it up and laughed. Tears prickled at the corner of her eyes at the thought of her death in a place like this, but she wiped them away furiously and turned another corner. The sounds were coming from right behind that door. Finally! In a few moments, she'd be reunited with her friends and if they died, at least it would be togeth-

"Don't. Move," somebody hissed and Ginny screamed as she was grabbed from behind. She abruptly went very still as the tip of a wand was placed at the back of her neck.

"It's about time, for Merlin's sake," the Death Eater grumbled. He yanked at Ginny roughly, plucking her wand out of her hand and taking a fistful of hair.

Ginny squealed painfully, arching her back in a vain attempt to keep her hair attached to her scalp. The Death Eater growled in annoyance at the sound and shook his head.

"Ah," he spat. "Here I am, running after your muggle-loving arse all over the damn Ministry! This isn't what I signed up for! I wanted to..."

Wherever his rant was going, Ginny would never know. At that exact moment, one of the walls suddenly exploded inward by a powerful blast of light. Both she and the Death Eater gave cries of surprise, but the Death Eater moved quickly to place her in front of him as a human shield, the tip of his wand placed gently on her temple. The billowing dust from the collapsed wall slowly dissipated as a dark figure emerged from the other side. Ginny watched with wide-eyed surprise as Potter casually strolled in. His robes were slightly torn and stained with blood and he casually held a sword over his shoulder, his wand twirling absently in his other hand. He caught sight of the Death Eater, stopped and looked pleased.

"Finally," Harry drawled, eying the Death Eater holding the red-haired girl with interest. "It's about time you bastards stopped hiding in your long corridors and offices." He stretched his neck and gave a sigh. "Seriously, this has to be the worst battlefield I've ever fought in. If I can go ten minutes without blowing the shit out of somebody, you know that there are some serious layout problems."

"Don't move!" the Death Eater yelled, clutching the girl tighter to his chest. The girl grunted and alternated between glaring at the Death Eater and looking at Harry hopelessly. "If you move...I'll... I'll... I'll kill her!"

"Uh huh," Harry deadpanned. He yawned and scratched his chin. "Alright then, go ahead."

"What?" the Death Eater stammered.

“What?” the girl screeched.

“At the moment, she’s in the way of my ‘killin’ time’,” Harry responded lazily, drawling out the last words with a thick hick accent. He kept his wand trained on the Death Eater, idly watching for an opening. “I can’t exactly curse you through her. Well, I can. There are a dozen curses that’d reduce both of you to bloody smears. But if I do that I’d get yelled at.”

“You’re insane!” the Death Eater hissed. A few sparks burst from the tip of his wand, scalding the girl’s forehead and causing her to cry out in pain. “Stay back, you maniac!”

“You’re the one with the wand to the girl,” Harry protested. “It’s not like you care about what happens to her either.”

“I mean it!” The Death Eater yelled. His eyes were frantic behind his mask. Harry wondered if they had met before- he certainly was displaying the signs of an enemy that had gotten away from Harry before: Paranoia, Fear, Terror, it was all good.

“C’mon,” Harry challenged. He took a step closer, a predatory smile on his face. “Do it.”

“Don’t!” The Death Eater roared and Harry stopped. A thin trickle of sweat ran under the man’s mask and dripped to the ground. “No tricks! I really will kill her unless you drop your wand!”

“Drop my wand?” Harry said, glancing down at his wand-hand speculatively. He pondered something and, after gaining Meciél’s approval, gave the Death Eater a brilliant smile. “You should have said that to begin with,” he said cheerfully.

“What?” The Death Eater asked in confusion.

“What?” The girl echoed, looking furious. “Don’t drop your wand! Curse him! Forget about me!”

“Unless your immune to a pulverising curse, shut it,” Harry said lazily. He lifted up his sword and, under the careful eyes of the Death Eater,

impaled it into the ground. Granted, it didn't go in very far and it was pretty wobbly, but it stayed upright.

"My wand," Harry said, twirling his wand in his hands.

"Yes, your wand!" The Death Eater said impatiently. He pressed his own wand a little harder into the girl's temple. "Drop it now!" He hissed.

"Alright, alright," Harry said lazily.

He eyed his wand and, with his left hand, stroked it along the side, his head bowed. The Death Eater couldn't see his lips moving in an almost-silent whisper or the extreme look of concentration in his eyes. Harry peered up and casually threw his wand to the Death Eater. Under the astonished eyes of both the dark wizard and the Hogwarts student, the wand shimmered and disintegrated into a pile of dust. Harry watched calmly as the girl gaped, while the Death Eater turned a baffled gaze upon the Denarian Knight.

"What?" Harry asked innocently, a strange gleam behind his eyes.

"What happened to your wand?" The Death Eater hissed furiously. The noise of battle rose up from the door behind him and he flinched.

"Oh, that," Harry said cheerfully. "It's a spell."

"A what?" the Death Eater asked. Fury swept over his eyes as he clutched the girl tightly around the arm. "I said I'd kill her!"

"Hey, don't get too hasty," Harry warned. "For all you know, I've turned my wand into super-charged magical particles that automatically cling to the nearest most magically-saturated object. If that's true, then the next time you try to cast a spell, your entire arm will blow off!"

The Death Eater made a strangled noise and held his wand out a little further from him than usual. Silence filled the room, save for the sound of fighting from next door, and Harry watched with a straight

face until he could take it no more. He started snickering and shook his head in amusement with a loud sigh.

“Super-charged magical particles?” he asked incredulously. “C’mon, don’t you know a stack of shit when you smell one?”

“My wand isn’t going to explode?” the Death Eater asked hesitantly.

“Nope,” Harry said cheerfully. “Let me tell you about the spell I cast. I’ll even keep my hands up, so you know I’m not doing anything tricky.”

“I don’t want to hear...” the Death Eater started. He stopped and abruptly sneezed.

“You see,” Harry said loudly. “I have a friend. A very smart friend, actually, and she’s good. She’s very good. She’s read massive amounts of notes about magical theory and all that kinda boring crap and- what’s worse, she’s understood it. So it was really only a matter of time before she got me to test out one of the spells she’s invented. Her first spell, actually.”

“I don’t...”

“Hey, don’t be rude,” Harry chastised, wagging his finger in the Death Eater’s direction. He smiled. “Now, where was I? Right, the spell. Well, the whole part of changing my wand into super-charged particles wasn’t entirely a lie. It has been transformed into particles, a lot like dust, really.”

“Where did it go?” the Death Eater asked warily.

“Well, like dust, it would have been scattered round the room,” Harry said casually. He directed a sudden malicious gaze to the Death Eater and smiled coldly. “That is, if I couldn’t control it.”

“Just give me an answer!” the Death Eater shouted, growing wary of the games and feeling more and more uneasy as Harry kept talking. Something was up, he knew it!

"But you haven't even heard the best part of the spell!" Harry protested loudly. "You see, I can reform the wand even after it's become dust. I can make it solid again and, because of my awesome power, I don't even need to be touching it to cast the first few spells. Hey, girl..."

"Ginny," the girl muttered sourly.

"Doesn't that sound like an awesome spell?" Harry prompted. "Say it. Say it sounds awesome."

"It sounds awesome," Ginny responded dully.

"Hold your horses. Don't get too excited, Granny," Harry warned.

"It's Ginny!"

"You see, the spell has one disadvantage," Harry said, a predatory gleam coming into his eyes. He gazed at the Death Eater in grim satisfaction. "It takes time. Time to get the wand-dust moving, time to get it all settled in the right place and time to reform it. For example, let's say I...oh, I don't know, directed my wand particles into your mouth."

"My...mouth?" the Death Eater said in horror.

"Your mouth," Harry answered with a nod. "It'd take me a bit of time to get them gathered together within your body and even more time for me to get them to solidify. What I'd need to do then is to distract you somehow, maybe by talking on and on for a minute or so about inane little things. Then, when I'm ready, I could solidify my wand with a thought and, say, a snap of my fingers."

Here he snapped his fingers and enjoyed the sight of the Death Eater gagging on a thick bulge in his neck.

"Then all I'd need to do is say an incantation like, hmm," Harry pondered thoughtfully. "Like Exturbo Arduro!"

The Death Eater let out a single note of a piercing scream before his open mouth glowed with an inner fire. Ginny screamed as a dull boom echoed in the room and the man was torn asunder, fire and blood spraying out of newly opened wounds. Smoke and the thick smell of burning flesh reeked through the air as the man was blasted backwards by the power of the spell, slamming into the door and splintering it open. He toppled over and disappeared into the next room, leaving Harry and Ginny alone.

“That concludes Spell Crafting 101,” Harry said with a smile. He grabbed his sword from the ground and eyed a shell-shocked Ginny with a hint of a smile. “I’m going in to do some killin’ and stuff. Interested?”

“You...he...you...” Ginny stammered. Her pale cheeks were even paler and she stared up at Harry with an expression of fear that made him feel so very proud with himself.

“Suit yourself,” Harry said cheerfully and strode through the doorway, descending from view and leaving Ginny in the company of her own thoughts and the Death Eater’s blood.

All throughout the amphitheatre, the Order of Phoenix and the Death Eaters clashed in a symphony of shouted incantation and flashes of light. Curses rained from both sides as they dodged, ducked and weaved around each other, deflecting and parrying with all their might. Three of the ten Death Eater’s had already been incapacitated by the highly-skilled Aurors of the Order. Several of the Order members, including a rosy-cheeked witch and a small, excitable wizard, also lay motionless on the ground. In the midst of all this fighting were five teenagers, huddling behind a stone bench and watching the fighting with wide eyes. One of them had been injured too, a blonde girl who had a massive gash down her shoulder that was sure to leave a permanent scar.

The battle looked like it could rage for quite some time. Suddenly, though, one of the doors at the edge of the circular room exploded outwards. Normally, the sound would have been lost in the fight if not for the smouldering corpse that went tumbling down the stairs after it. Everybody stopped despite themselves as they watched the descent

of the fallen Death Eater. He landed at the centre of the room, twisted, mangled and barely recognisable. The corpse was stained with blood and greasy smoke arose from the large, ragged hole in its chest, where glowing embers still burned brightly in the dead flesh.

Suddenly, the mouth of the dead man opened up and everybody watched with fascination as a stream of something like dust flew up from between broken teeth. The wispy trail floated back up to the broken door and shimmered as it hardened into wood, a wand, in the outstretched hand of Harry Potter. The wand flashed with a menacing crimson light as Harry stared down and around the room with a nasty smile on his face.

"What, start without me?" he asked indignantly, his voice filling in the sudden silence.

"It's Potter!" one of them breathed, his hushed whisper of fear echoing around the large stone room. "Potter's here!"

"Get him!" yelled one of the Death Eaters, a haggard witch with long, stringy hair and fanatical eyes. "Kill him!"

"It's Potter!" shouted another one of the Death Eater's at the same time. He made a break for it, dashing down the stairs away from Harry and running for the door on the other side of the room.

One of the other wizards in the room, a dark-skinned man Harry recognised from the Order of Phoenix, leaped forward and stopped the fleeing Death Eater. Wands whirled and exchanged spells and suddenly the room became a battle once more. This time, though, there was a more than a hint of desperation in some of the Death Eater's actions.

"Bunch of weaklings," Harry muttered, casually strolling down the steps towards the centre of the room, where a large, stone veil stood on the dais, a black curtain fluttering from a wind that Harry couldn't feel.

One of the Death Eaters nearest to him raised a wand. "Avada Kedavra!" the dark wizard roared with more than tinge of fear in his voice.

Harry, without breaking a step, casually lifted the sword from his shoulder and, in a swing of silver flame, batted the streak of deathly green light away. The supposedly unblockable curse seemed to go to great lengths to avoid the holy light from the Sword of the Cross and crashed into a stone bench.

"Corium Ustulo!" Harry said with a cruel smile.

He lifted his wand as a cone of dim orange light shone from his wand, much like a powerful lumos charm. The light shone upon the Death Eater, who paused for a moment and then let out a bloodcurdling scream. Steam arose from the vents in his mask as the man shuddered and hollered. Harry continued down the stairs, angling his wand so that the light remained on the Death Eater even as he fell back onto one of the stone benches. When Harry cancelled the spell, a small smile on his face, the Death Eater sagged, his mask dropping off his face. All of his skin had broken out into severe burns and he fell limply to the ground.

Harry harrumphed. "Back in my day, we could take a few hits and still stand up and give as good as we got," he muttered sourly.

'You can't blame the weak for being... well, weak,' Meciell said, although Harry could feel her own heightened sense of enjoyment. Perhaps that was why the two of them got on so well. They both enjoyed a good fight.

"Sure I can," Harry said cheerfully, directing his wand at another Death Eater. He made a few quick flicks and grinned when the ground was torn apart by his spell as an almost-translucent crescent sliced through four stone benches and cleaved the man in two in a messy shower of blood.

"Get out of here!" one of the Death Eaters shouted to his partner. The two of them broke off and hurled themselves up the steps, only to stop as the door opened and another wizard entered the room.

Albus Dumbledore, fugitive from the law and exiled Headmaster of Hogwarts, stood there in his long, purple robes. His eyes, normally kind, were hard and his face pale and furious as he held aloft his wand. The two Death Eaters froze, before one of them raised his wand in an attempt to curse the powerful old mage. Dumbledore didn't say a single word as he flicked his wand, and a bright, golden light filled the room. When it receded, the two Death Eaters lay stunned and bound at the elderly wizard's feet.

At once, the other Death Eater's panicked and fled. Harry watched disgustedly as Dumbledore reeled them in with a powerful spell that yanked them by their legs. Some of them tried to stop the spell by clutching onto the ground with their fingernails. Others broke off, most notably the fanatical-eyed witch that Harry spotted earlier. With a grin, Harry moved to confront her.

"Whoa," he said loudly, eying the witch up and down as she turned to face him. "Damn, woman, I wouldn't let my dick even go near you!"

"Filthy half-blood!" the witch cursed. Her wand blurred and Harry stepped up to meet the attack with a grin on his face.

Dark magic surged between them as the two powerful wand-wielders engaged each other. Harry had to admit, the ugly bitch knew her stuff as her wand movements went a skin-peeler, to a bone-gnasher, to a teeth-cruncher and to a blood-boiler in no more than a second. Spells and curse were deflected around them as Harry responded, summoning fire and might to smash the witch down. Stone benches shattered and fire blazed brightly as the witch let out a maddened shriek and finally turned tail and ran.

"C'mon! Avada Kedavra!" Harry called out loudly. The green flash of light soared past the witch's ear, missing her by mere centimetres. "You're the best fight- Effodio! - I've had all day!"

He turned around and sighed in disappointment as he saw Dumbledore doing the finishing touches upon the rest of the Death Eaters.

"That figures," he muttered grumpily. "The first time in a month that I get into a fight and he shows up to hog all the fun!"

"You bitch!" somebody roared and Harry cocked his head, seeing Neville sprinting through the aisles after the rabid witch. "My parents! I'll kill you!"

"Aw, kids grow up so fast," Harry said lazily. His pleasant expression vanished and his eyes narrowed speculatively when he noticed the glowing orb in the boy's hands. "What's that?"

'A Prophecy Sphere,' Meciell answered immediately. 'Is that what the Death Eater's were after?'

"Huh," Harry uttered thoughtfully. He glanced around, seeing that most of the Order members were in no shape to be chasing after Neville, and sighed. "Ah well, let's go see what this is all about."

Despite his head start, Neville was by no means a fast runner. Unfit and out of shape, he was puffing by the time he reached the atrium on the heels of the witch, but his fury hadn't dulled one bit. Conversely, Harry was in top physical condition, mostly because Meciell regulated his body rather than anything that Harry did. He was much too lazy to exercise and enjoyed all the wrong sorts of foods at all the right meal times. Nonetheless, Neville beat Harry by a few moments as the Denarian decided the quickest way around the corridors and hallways would be through the walls. He reached the atrium just as Neville flung himself from behind a large statue of an ugly wizard, bellowing "Crucio!"

"You stupid boy!" the witch shouted gleefully. "You need to mean that curse! You need to seek, no, desire, the agony of your enemy! You're pathetic righteous anger can't help you here!"

"Allow me then," Harry said dryly, striding from the elevator. He raised his wand. "Crucio!"

The witch shrieked as Harry's spell tore off the leg of the centaur she was hiding behind. She snarled, much like an animal, and twirled on

her feet, disappearing with a loud crack. She reappeared on the other side of the hall, near the rows of fireplaces, her wand aloft.

“Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!” She shrieked. Three streaks of green light surged forward. Harry blocked two with the silver sword and kicked Neville none-to-gently to the side as the third one came close to sending the pudgy boy’s life.

A returning spell from Harry crashed against her shields and evaporated with a puff of smoke, but it sent the haggard, skinny witch off her feet. She landed on the ground, mewling rather pathetically as Harry levelled his wand at her with a cold smile.

“Master!” She shrieked. “Master! Help your faithful servant! Help your faithful Bellatrix!”

“I’m afraid not,” Harry said coldly. “You’re weak, pathetic master can’t help you here. For standing up to me and amusing me, I’m going to make sure that you suffer. Goodbye, you bitch. Putesco!”

A flash of murky-brown blasted forward from the tip of Harry’s wand and rocketed at the shrieking witch. Harry got a glimpse of her panicked eyes and sneered, before his view was abruptly cut off by a flash of black. Suddenly, a malevolent presence blasted through the atrium and Harry flinched reflexively. His eyes widened as Lord Voldemort appeared, crouched on one knee next to Bellatrix’s slumped form with his bare hand outstretched. Harry’s curse hovered mere millimetres off the Dark Lord’s spindly fingers as he stood up, his slit-like nostrils flaring and his crimson eyes gleaming as he stared down at his most loyal servant.

“You have failed me, Bellatrix,” Voldemort hissed coldly. His other hand reached out and stroked her hair with surprising tenderness. “You will be punished for this.”

“My Lord, My Lord!” Bellatrix was sobbing.

Voldemort turned his head and stared directly into Harry’s eyes. Without a hint of effort, he crushed the spell in his hands and brushed

aside a fistful of yellow sparks. Clad in robes of the darkest colour, Voldemort smiled thinly at Harry.

“Potter,” he greeted in his high-pitch tone.

“Voldemort,” Harry responded tightly.

His fingers clutched his wand, his knuckles white as he stared down Voldemort with new confidence. He had progressed much over the past few months since their encounter.

A fluttering of wings caught his attention and Harry inclined his head, keeping a close eye on Voldemort as he gazed up at the fountain. On the largest of the four gleaming statues stood Vesper, her slim form clad in a gown of silk. Her beautiful blue eyes flashed with yellow menace and she stared down at Harry coldly.

“Host of Meciél,” she called out softly, but with great hatred.

Neville was crouching behind the statues, looking deathly pale and staring up at Voldemort with nothing short of total, utter fear. The glowing orb was loose in his hands and he made no effort to resist as Voldemort summoned towards him.

Harry took a step forward to intervene, but the prophecy sphere suddenly paused in mid-air and then slowly floated towards the outstretched hand of Albus Dumbledore. His light-blue gaze swept over the room as he clasped the orb in his gnarled hand.

“Good evening, Harry,” he greeted politely, tucking the orb into his robes. He looked grim and an aura of pure might swept from him like a wind, ruffling Voldemort’s robes. “You must be Lady Vesper, if I dare presume. It was foolish for either of you to have come here tonight. The Aurors will be here soon.” He turned his gaze to Voldemort, his eyes hard. “There is no escape for you tonight, Tom. This is your end.”

Voldemort let out a wordless hiss, sounding all the more like a snake as he glared at Dumbledore with a hatred that far exceeded what he felt for Harry. Harry, for his part, stared up at Vesper with a cocky grin

on his face. Hellfire pumped through his veins, his vision took on a barely-noticeable red tinge and sulphur reeked through his nose as the four titans stared each other down and he readied all of his power for the oncoming fight.

A/N: Thanks to DLP for helping me edit this chapter into what it is. I want to thank Modgudr for his spell check. After this, there are only two chapters left. I've already began penning the plot to the third and final book of this trilogy, and I hope to start it mere days after this story is finished. I hope you enjoy.

Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord was clad in elegant dark robes that contrasted rather spookily with his pale skin. His crimson eyes gleamed and an aura of dark menace surrounded him, invisible to the naked eye but still noticeable. He stood by the kneeling figure of Bellatrix, watching Harry and Dumbledore with nothing short of rabid hatred.

Albus Dumbledore. The former Headmaster was dressed in long purple robes, with charmed silver stars twinkling merrily on his robes. His long beard swayed gently as pure magic and might surrounded him, so much different from Voldemort's but not the weaker for it. He stood by Harry's side, a pleasant smile on his face, but his eyes had hardened from benign Headmaster to fearsome Grand Sorcerer.

Vesper. Perhaps the sensuous, lithe woman had a name once, but all that remained of her was a shell, inhabited by a presence as old as time itself. A disfiguring curse surged under her beautiful skin as she stood high up on the fountain of magical brethren, her sheer silk robes flapping and revealing tantalising flashes of skin. Although it looked like one gust of wind would knock her down, there was something about her that outshone even Voldemort.

Harry Potter. By far the youngest of the four magical titans present. He was dressed in Hogwarts robes that were ripped and torn, even bloodied, in some places. Luckily though, not all of it was his. He was the most bizarre of the lot, an amazing contrast between the pure, raw darkness of Hell and the blessed light of Heaven. The Sword of the Cross laid casually over his shoulder glinted with a silver light, reflecting purity and the divine. Conversely, the runes carved into the wand in his right hand flashed with a dark crimson light, the fires of Hell roaring through the magical channel, ready to cast down those that opposed its Master.

“Well, this is exciting,” Harry said cheerfully, prowling below the large, bronze statues and gazing up at Vesper with hungry eyes. “Oh, Vesper,” he chided mockingly. “Don’t tell me you’re still a vegan? Seriously, get a little meat on your bones so you won’t be cut in half when I use my meat to bone you.”

“Quiet, mortal,” Vesper commanded.

Harry smiled while Dumbledore and Voldemort watched silently. Beneath the idle words, each one of the four were taking a few moments to gather their immense power, refining it for immediate use as they increased their focus and readied themselves for what was about to occur next. Harry likened the process to foreplay. Sure, you could thrust in straight away but it got to be a bit uncomfortable for all parties. Of course, he could hardly criticize, since he was channelling forward wave after wave of Hellfire, strengthening his body and flexing his magical muscles, so to speak. Still, it did mean that he could have a little bit of fun with Vesper.

That was always entertaining as well.

“You forgot the ‘im’ part of mortal,” Harry said, smiling lazily. “After all, I’m just like you- except sexier- and more powerful. Lots more powerful.”

“In your pathetic, little dreams,” was all Vesper said, gazing down at Harry with a look of supposed superiority that suddenly made the Denarian Knight furious. How dare this waif of a woman look down on him! Nonetheless, he suppressed his temper and cocked his eyebrows.

“In your dreams?” Harry repeated incredulously. “What, are you six? Where are the ‘thees’ and ‘thous’?”

Vesper, however, was eying the sword that he laid against his shoulder with noticeable disdain and disgust. She shook her head sourly. “You claim to be one of us, yet you wield the tool of our greatest nemesis. Look at you!”

The last words were snarled out with such anger that even Harry was taken aback. Vesper crossed her arms over her chest and smiled coldly.

"Tell me, little boy," Vesper began. "When was the last time you transformed into your demonic form? When was the last time the song of Hell surged through your veins?"

Harry didn't answer.

"Can you even transform anymore?" Vesper asked disgustedly. She gestured at the sword with a pale hand. "Or has the blade already burnt out that talent from the darkness within you?"

"Well, I say," Harry said, affecting a pompous tone and looking scandalised. "God intended it to be this way! Are you questioning God's will?" He paused. "Do I need to smite you? By God, I will smite so bad! That's it, you are so smited. I'm going to smite you so bad that you won't be able to walk properly. Or breathe. Ever."

"Let me tell you something," Vesper started, anger contorting her face as she drew upon ancient grudges. "Let me tell you of the agony of rotting away for the last one thousand years! Let me tell you of the knowledge that even my last refuge away from the darkness of the void has been tainted by pain! Let me tell you..."

"I'd rather you didn't," Harry said dryly. He turned his back and strode over to Dumbledore. "We've had our little verbal spar. It's their turn now. If you have something else to say, whisper it into my ear when you're on your knees and begging for mercy."

Vesper bristled as Harry turned to Dumbledore and Voldemort, who had watched the proceedings quietly and with a degree of interest.

"Your turn," Harry said to Dumbledore quietly.

The elder wizard inclined his head and stared at Lord Voldemort with something Harry was astonished to see- pity. The Dark lord noticed the look and his fury doubled, a dark shadow looming over him as rage flared in his eyes.

"You... pity me?" Voldemort asked incredulously.

"I pity you," Dumbledore agreed. "I pity the small boy who was so grateful and shining with enthusiasm when I took him from the orphanage and introduced him to the wonders of magic. I pity the wizard in front of me who could have become one of the greatest names of all time, as Tom Riddle- not Lord Voldemort."

"I see," Voldemort hissed flatly. He smiled thinly. "Do not pity me, Dumbledore. The 'wonders of magic' you tried to limit me to were nothing in comparison to what I have seen and experienced. I am the greatest wizard to walk this earth since Salazar Slytherin..."

"And Harry Potter," Harry muttered under his breath, but he was ignored.

"...and you stand there with the audacity to pity me!" Voldemort finished, his high-pitched voice rising. His next words boomed across the atrium. "Pity yourself, feeble old man, for I will destroy you here tonight."

"You have a chance, Tom," Dumbledore said quietly, once Voldemort's outburst had concluded. "Tonight, right here, you have a choice to change, to become a true wizard. Surrender yourself. Allow yourself to feel regret at the misery you have caused, like a true human being. Or is that beyond your capabilities now?"

"Regret?" Voldemort whispered. He laughed; a derisive laugh that echoed around the atrium. "To regret means that I erred, that I was wrong. I am Lord Voldemort. I am never wrong, and I far beyond the pathetic definition of 'human' that..."

A loud bang blasted over his next words and Voldemort's eyes widened. His arm blurred as he easily parried away the silver flash of light rocketing towards his head. The light veered into the ground, ripping through the floorboards. Splinters of wood went flying and abruptly the atrium was silent once more. Three sets of eyes turned to Harry accusingly as the Denarian smiled innocently.

“What?” He asked defensively. “This is the pre-fight banter, not a chance to tell us your fucking sob stories!”

Without another word, the Denarian twirled on his feet and disappeared with a loud crack. He repapered on the head of the giant bronze centaur, his hand outstretched and fire burning his eyes. Vesper spun around as light flared in Harry’s palm, her eyes wide with surprise. With a sudden burst of flame, a loud boom rocked the fountain as Vesper was engulfed in fire and thrown off to the ground. Harry’s laughter drifted over the occupants of the atrium and so began the clash of the titans.

Voldemort and Dumbledore whipped out their wands at each other in blurring movements and suddenly the air between them was alive. Giant crackling bolts of power, one red and the other green, slammed into each other in a roaring crackle. A brilliant light flared in the middle as Dumbledore gripped his wand with both hands, his eyes focussed behind his half-moon glasses. Voldemort laughed chillingly amidst the screeching noise, akin to metal grating against metal, and gestured with one hand. A fierce wind suddenly roared into existence. Dumbledore’s eyes widened as his robes flapped fiercely around him, propelled by a gale that would send a fully-grown man off his feet. Dumbledore, however, lifted his leg and slammed his foot on the ground. The ground shuddered and rocked and this time it was Voldemort who was surprised as the earth shuddered and cracked. As the ground fell around his feet, Voldemort remained standing in mid-air, his eyes narrowed in fierce concentration.

As the two wizards, who were regarded by the Wizarding World to be the most powerful of the age, clashed, Harry stared down at Vesper and grinned as he watched the fiery mass of Vesper slammed into the ground. The fire suddenly disappeared in a flash and Vesper was revealed once more, crouching down and glaring up at Harry furiously. Darkness flickered in her eyes and Harry watched in surprise as she stretched out her right arm.

It all became clear when the right arm elongated, bones stretching unnaturally far as Vesper initiated a partial demonic transformation-much like Harry’s wings of bone. The skin of her arm grew black and thick, another joint formed between her elbow and shoulder and tiny

row of stubble appeared on her forearm. Suddenly, the stubble shot in a single row of quill-like spikes. At the same time, a wicked hook-like claw grew from her wrist.

“That’s new,” Harry muttered to himself. He focussed his power, Hellfire raging within him, and took a running jump off the centaur’s head and dove through the air.

Fire blossomed in his hands as he fell, but Vesper merely laughed. Crouching back on her legs, she jumped- no, soared up to meet his descent with murder brewing in her eyes, moving at incredible speeds as if she was actually flying. Harry’s eyes widened and he thumped his wand on his chest, bellowing out a hasty defensive charm. Light formed around him and a barrier of solid magic glinting with crimson hues enveloped his form, just as Vesper was upon him.

Vesper lifted her suddenly spiked arm and stabbed it at Harry. There was a horrible screeching noise as the hook dragged along Harry’s shield. Sparks darted around them and the shield visibly weakened as Harry’s descent pushed him along the blade. The Denarian Knight turned his head and his emerald eyes met Vesper’s blue gaze. For that split second, they stared at each other in mid-air... and then Harry fell to the ground and Vesper rose to the air, seemingly not concerned with trivial things such as gravity.

‘The ground!’ Meciél warned.

“I know,” Harry gritted his teeth. The weakened magical shield shattered around him as Harry lifted his wand from his chest. He stretched his arm out, his wand in front of him, and closed his eyes.

To Bellatrix and Neville, observing both fights with nothing short of total awe and fear, it seemed like Harry hit the ground wand first. Suddenly though, a ominous rumble ran through the room and the ground exactly below the tip of Harry’s wand was torn asunder by a gigantic shockwave as Harry channelled all of the force behind his descent into the ground. Floorboards were ripped up and Dumbledore and Voldemort were both affected enough by the whiplash of the spell to momentarily lose control of lightning coil that

raged between them. It swerved sideways, a crackling coil of power flaring in all directions until the two wizards reasserted themselves moments later.

Harry, on his part, dropped down on the shattered ground like he had just jumped off a bunk-bed. He wasted no time, his wand coming up to his open palm as he muttered, “*Virga vires occasus!*”

His very form seemed to shimmer as the air thickened around him into something like fog, as if Harry was sucking all the heat from around him. A bright glow emanated from his palm, and with a wordless roar he threw out his arm and gestured at Vesper, who had just finished her ascent up towards the roof. She spun around, blue eyes flashing malicious yellow, as a burst of small, blazing balls of fire shot at her.

Harry smirked up at her as the balls of fire rocketed at her with great speed. Vesper raised her normal hand and curled up her fingers. Bolts of white lightning shot from her fingers, lashing out at several of the balls of fire, which exploded with a loud pop and a sudden expansion of fire. Several of them, however, zoomed towards her. She slashed at them with her feather-covered arm, batting a few aside. They zoomed past her, spinning and spiralling back as they lashed out at the Denarian leader. Harry, his palm still open, clenched his fist with a grim smile and the balls of fire suddenly exploded, surrounding Vesper in an orb of rolling flames.

The flames parted and dispersed into smoke, revealing Vesper, signed but still alive. Harry growled in frustration but paused as she raised a hand. Her eyes were completely yellow now, cruel, vast ageless eyes that stared down at him. Sparks flickered from the tips of her fingers as she floated high above the ground.

“Shit,” Harry said blankly.

With a deafening boom of thunder, a blazing bolt of lightning shot from her hand. The intensity of the bolt was bright enough that even Vesper had to shield her eyes as she hurled it at Harry. It struck just as Harry twirled on his feet, and the ground shuddered. Fires were whipped up, consuming many a wooden floorboard, and residual

energy clashed in the form of a rather beautiful display of cascading sparks.

Harry reappeared right in the middle of Dumbledore and Voldemort's clash, and gave a startled yell of surprise as the searing coil of lightning between them arced towards him. Voldemort gave a wordless hiss, and then grunted as Dumbledore yanked the lightning coil back as Harry hastily apparated again. The Dark Lord's wand shuddered and suddenly he withdrew, taking a step back and allowing the clash with Dumbledore to cease. He raised his arms and gestured at Dumbledore grandly. Shadows whipped up around him until a gigantic mass of darkness rose into the air, sucking in all the light from the fireplaces and causing the entire room to dim into darkness.

"Very impressive, Tom," Dumbledore said amidst the darkness. Golden light surged around him, highlighting his weathered features and long, wizard's hat. "However, I am afraid that I am familiar with the magic you wield. All modesty aside, it will not be enough to defeat me.'

"We shall see," Voldemort spat.

He brandished his wand at Dumbledore and the gigantic mass of shadow surged forward, forming into something vaguely resembling a dragon's head. Dumbledore didn't move until the darkness was right above him. Then, he simply raised his wand and spoke out three words. The entire room stilled for a moment, as if the words themselves were gathering everything up for themselves, and then they boomed out as if Dumbledore had roared them into a megaphone. Small pieces of debris around the wizened sorcerer were crushed by the mere sound of this voice and Voldemort gasped as the gigantic shadow was reduced to nothingness, torn asunder by a mere voice. Dumbledore twisted his wand at Voldemort and spoke another Word. Although his voice was clear, nobody listening in could actually understand what it was that the former Headmaster had said.

Whatever it was, it was powerful. The force of the Word shot at the Dark Lord, crushing the ground and distorting the air. Voldemort crossed his arms over his chest and, with a flare of his crimson eyes,

gathered the darkness around him once more. Shadow and Word met in a deafening roar of conflict as the word stripped away the shadow and slammed into Voldemort. The Dark Lord was thrown backwards, tumbling and twisting as he bounced along the ground. He arose several yards away, his eyes furious.

“The Psalm of Ar’uck’shei,” Voldemort murmured thoughtfully. He gathered himself, staring at Dumbledore with grudging respect. “You impress me, old man. That is very ancient lore.”

“I pride myself on learning from our history,” Dumbledore responded calmly, walking towards Voldemort with an expression that might have better suited a tea-party than a battle to the death. At the same time, the ground cracked and shattered a dozen yards away as Harry summoned a pit of flame to devour Vesper. The female Denarian screeched but broke free, soaring up into the air amidst Harry’s cries of “You fight like a pansy, you stupid bitch! Come down here so we can settle this properly!”

“Do you, now?” Voldemort questioned softly. “I have found that there is something that, no matter how many times it occurs, people like you will always succumb to.”

Dumbledore’s expression was that of alarm as Voldemort levelled his wand at Neville’s crouching form. “Avada Kedavra!” The Dark Lord hissed, then stepped back into the shadow and didn’t reappear.

Dumbledore’s arm was a blur as advanced spells shot at the statues above the fifth-year Gryffindor. The bronze witch suddenly bent down, protecting Neville with its bronze shell under Dumbledore’s guidance. A dull gong echoed throughout the atrium as the killing curse smashed harmlessly upon the statue. There was a faint noise from behind him as Voldemort stepped out of Dumbledore’s shadow.

“Die, old man,” he whispered menacingly.

Dumbledore whirled around, his wand rising up even as Voldemort pressed forward. Green light pooled at the tip of his wand, reflected in the malevolent and triumphant eyes of Lord Voldemort- and suddenly a hand shot forward and grabbed Voldemort’s wrist.

Voldemort's eyes widened as his head shot around to follow the hand back up to its owner, Harry. Harry grinned and lifted the Sword of the Cross. Silver fire flared as Voldemort hissed in anger, and suddenly he became the shadow once more as Harry brought it down where the Dark Lord was standing just a second ago.

"That was close, Dumbledore," Harry said cheerfully. He hoisted the sword back onto his shoulder and arrogantly grinned up at the tall Headmaster. "You must be slipping if you let such a little trick like that..."

He trailed off and without warning, pushed Dumbledore to the left and throwing himself to the right. An instant later, a group of three small quill-like missiles shot past them. They rocketed to the other side of the atrium and struck the wall. The ground shuddered and the wall, the entire wall, suddenly exploded in a shower of wooden scraps and large chunks of rocks. Harry stared up at Vesper with surprise as the Denarian cocked her head and smiled. She raised her transformed arm and another one of her quills blasted forward.

Harry growled in fury and swiped at it with his wand, deflecting it into the small statue of the house-elf. It exploded in a rain of metal shards, which suddenly zoomed forward and became other various items. Harry watched Dumbledore direct the debris towards Voldemort, who was wrapped up by it as he emerged from the shadow. Rocks, metal, rope and weights all shot around him, surrounding and consuming him. Dumbledore finished it off with a spell that was powerful enough to make the hairs on Harry's arms stand on end.

Harry didn't wait to see what happened and apparated on the spot. He reappeared further down the atrium, closer to the large golden elevator. Vesper cocked her head, smiled nastily as winds flapped around her silky gown, revealing parts of her that Harry would be very interested in getting know better under different circumstances. The other Denarian vanished into mid-air without a noise, leaving Harry standing there clueless.

"Invisible?" Harry muttered carefully.

'I don't think so,' Meciél responded softly. 'Vesper has learned many a new trick since our parting. I don't recognise them all now.'

"Huh," Harry uttered, ignoring the flares of light and roaring explosions drifting over from the other side of the atrium. A soft gust of wind blew past his face and he absently brushed his hair out of his eyes.

Suddenly, horror crossed over his face as it struck him, but it was too late. Behind him, Vesper leapt out of the wind and brought her armoured arm down onto Harry's exposed back. Harry extracted his wings in a single instant as Vesper's blade cut through cloth and tore into flesh, the bone-wrym wings stopping the curved hook from striking the spine. There was an odd clicking noise and Vesper brought her lips down to Harry's ears.

"Goodbye, little boy," she whispered seductively.

One of the quills shot from her arm, through Harry's wings and straight into Harry's back. The destructive power behind the quills, which had torn apart 10 centimetres of pure rock, shot through Harry's body and he grunted in agony. Blood spat out from his lips, a stream of it spraying out on the ground below. Harry sagged forward, making odd, wheezing noises as Meciél raced frantically to heal as much of the critical damage as she could.

"You...this..." Harry started softly. He was still wheezing, but he's pained grunts turned into an agony-filled chuckle of rage. "I'm...I'm going to kill you for this!"

He grabbed the hilt of his sword and silver fire burned in his mind as he stabbed it backwards, his lips stretched in a wide, blood-smeared grin. Vesper shrieked in agony as the blade stabbed into her abdomen and staggered back, taking pressure of Harry's bone-wrym wings. The Denarian Knight whirled around, his eyes utterly furious. He swung the sword in his left hand, an arc of silver flame that missed Vesper by a hair as she dodged. His right hand flicked forward and deathly green blasted forward, catching on the tails of Vesper's now blood-soaked silky gown. Vesper blocked the next blow with the sword with a dagger pulled from her cleavage. The jewelled

knife glinted under whatever dark enchantments had been placed upon it. Large, black wings sprouted from Vesper's back in a shower of dark feathers as she blocked a flash of bright flame, shrugging it off with her wings.

The two Denarians were suddenly engaged in a short-ranged brawl using every weapon they had their disposal. Although Meciél was distracted and occupied, working furiously to mend Harry's severely damaged internal organs, Harry was still on par with Vesper in short-ranged fighting. Sword and dagger flashed as they clashed in a shower of sparks while wings lanced over the top of their heads, feather meeting bone. Magic flared between them, Vesper using her right hand to summon powerful blasts of destructive magic capable of ripping through Harry in an instant. Harry responded in kind, parrying and deflecting with the best of them and sending forth streaks of bright green light of waves of searing flame to scorch the wounded woman. He revelled in the mixture of physical and magical fight, his eyes almost glowing with eagerness and a wide grin stretched across his bloodied face.

Soon, however, it became clear that Harry had the edge. Perhaps it was because that his wounds were slowly but surely healing as Meciél worked over his body at a frantic pace, whilst the damage dealt by the Sword of the Cross remained as severe as ever for Vesper. It was a testament of her power that she was still able to stand. Regardless, Harry became faster to dodge and deal out damage whilst Vesper continued to slow down, her body taxed to the limits.

"Effodio!" Harry barked as he clashed blades with Vesper.

The silver flash of light exploded from the tip of his wand, missing Vesper's head by an instant as she dodged but catching her on the tip of her shoulder. A chunk of bloody meat was blown aside and Vesper fell back, her eyes glittering furiously but making no noise of pain at all.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry hissed furiously.

His aim was off, however, as Vesper pushed him out of the blade-lock and lashed out with her leg. Harry winced as she struck him in the thigh with enough force to damage a tendon. The green light slammed into the ground and he limped forward as Meciél instantly began healing his leg, since mobility was a top priority in this fight. Harry surged forward, steel clashing on steel, and slipped a wicked punch to the face. Vesper staggered backwards, her back hitting a wall. There was no where left for her to retreat to.

“Argentum telum!” Harry snapped. He brought his sword up, bypassing her defence, and slammed the hilt into her wounded stomach. Vesper screeched in pain at the blow, a screech that only intensified as the silvery light shot forward from his wand like an arrow, tearing into and through her chest. Vesper was gargling as Harry lifted his wand to her face with the incantation of “Siagrus!”

A shimmering pulse of near-invisible magic rippled the air as Harry directed it at Vesper’s face. He watched with glee, eager to see the bitch burn before him. Vesper let out a wailing scream of pain as her skin started to bubble and melt. A part of the wall behind her which was also caught in the light was glowing with heat and turning onto molten rock. With a flash of fire, Vesper’s hair was in flames, half of her face melting beneath her. Her eye turned black and boiled in her socket and half of her teeth broke down and crumbled into dust.

“Burn, you fucking bitch!” Harry hissed softly. “And goodbye, little girl.”

Vesper shuddered and stopped screaming, making Harry frown. She took a deep breath, her chest expanding, and opened her mouth. The cry that left her mouth was nothing but pure noise and it struck down at Harry repeatedly. Harry was thrown back, his mind suffering through a battering as Vesper screamed and screamed. The ground cracked, although it was hard to tell amidst all the damage that had been done to it beforehand.

As soon as it had started, it was over. Harry staggered back to his feet, breathing harshly as Vesper tried to glare up at him with her blackened and battered face. Her single yellow eye focussed in on him, consumed with rage and madness. The eyes remained

unchanged as Hellfire warped over Vesper's battered body and suddenly she was no longer human. Large, black feathered wings sprouted from a fur-covered chest, as long as a limousine. A vaguely humanoid head nestled between them, a glowing sigil appearing on her feathered forehead. A curved, serrated beak elongated from her mouth and a long, wiry tail grew from her back. Her legs and feet became talons and her other arm transformed into a replica of her right, a row of quill-like feathers sprouting out from her forearm. It was completed with a set of dull brown eyes, and Harry was taken aback by the sheer desperation and loneliness in them.

They were the eyes of a Denarian host who had been subjugated.

The eyes stared desperately down at Harry, wordlessly begging him to kill her, to end her suffering. Harry took in the Vesper's entire demonic form and grunted

"Explains the flying," he muttered under his breath.

The demonic Vesper opened her beak and another screech slammed into Harry. This time, it was significantly more powerful and Harry's world went silent as an undercurrent of fear slammed into his head. Meciél strained to shrug it off as Harry blinked, dazed, dizzy and lightheaded. His entire world was just quiet, almost peaceful. Colour had left him, leaving him with a view of different sorts of greys. A sense of peacefulness overcame him, even as a distant part of him screamed and roared in defiance. He glanced up and noted with detached interest that a large black blur was zooming at him. Distantly, he knew that the blur would probably kill him.

Ah well, he thought. He supposed he could move, but he just didn't feel like doing so at the moment. As the black blur zoomed closer and closer, a sudden burning sensation made him wince. He glanced down at his hand and winced at the bright white flare of light in his world of greys. Abruptly, Harry found himself lifting the bar of blinding light and holding it out in front of him.

It expanded in his vision and suddenly his entire world was white, bright light. There was no pain, no hatred, no fear- just a sense of peacefulness and contentment that Harry had never felt before in his

entire life. His body was light and he was floating in the light, willing to bask in it for the rest of his life. There was a dull thump and then Harry gently drifted out of the white landscape and back into reality. He blinked in surprise and gazed at his hands, which surrounded the hilt of the Sword of the Cross. His eyes travelled up the glinting blade, where it became dark with blood, and ended up at Vesper's bestial chest.

"Fucking hell," Harry muttered softly. "That was better than crack."

Vesper screamed and Harry winced as the sense of peacefulness was yanked away and all of his aches, pains, and hatred returned. Hellfire flared in his eyes as levelled his wand at the avian demon.

"Avada Kedavra!" He roared. The beam of green light shot past it as Vesper, wounded, bleeding and torn to bits, still managed to soar up high into the air. "Fuck, you're a persistent bitch!"

She spread her wings out, all the while dripping copious amounts of sticky black blood all over the ground. Actually, Harry thought in surprise, glaring up at her, he was surprised she wasn't dead already. There was nothing that could survive losing that much blood – unless it wasn't blood at all.

Harry watched with wide eyes as the thick, black liquid rolled up off the ground to become a spectre of shadow. Yellow eyes burned in a formless, hazy humanoid piece of necromancy, and it stretched out its arms as it hurled itself at Harry.

"Effodio!" Harry snapped. The silver flash slammed into the spectre and it exploded in a splatter of liquid. However, the liquid merely shimmered and rejoined as more and more spectres rose up over the battlefield.

"Ah, come on!" Harry protested, glaring at Vesper. He figured that she must have been directing the spell or something, because she didn't take the obvious chance to attack. "This isn't fair!"

Dumbledore's booming voice could be heard as Harry glanced over to the Headmaster's duel with Voldemort. The elderly wizard smote

seven of the spectres with a flash of brilliant golden light as Voldemort threw off Dumbledore's last attempt to attack him—glowing strands of rope-like light that bound his arms to his chest. The Headmaster's robes had been ripped and torn around the left shoulder, revealing a surprisingly bloodied muscular chest.

Harry disposed of one of the spectres by means of a Killing Curse and turned another three into wet splatters along the ground. At the same time, he threw himself to the ground to avoid Vesper as she swooped down. Her talons raked through the ground, tearing through wood and stone like a very sharp knife through warm human flesh. As she soared past him, her tail whipped up and lashed out at him like a whip. Harry jerked his head back, the tail brushing by his ears and crushing a piece of twisted debris into dust.

"Dammit!" Harry hissed furiously. He sent a volley of green streaks of light at Vesper, who weaved through them with surprising agility for something so big.

As Vesper soared across the room, flying over Dumbledore and Voldemort as they clashed in a terrific display of might magic, Harry took a deep breath and concentrated. Within his mind, Meciell helped him weave and form together some of the largest reserves of magic he had left into a powerful spell, muttering "Gladius Infusco Lucis!"

Fire blazed into existence around him, oily black haze drifting up into the air as Hellfire was given physical form. Several blazing rods of roaring Hellfire burst into existence around him, elongating under Harry's direction and changing into fiery mimics of swords. Sulphur reeked in his nose as Harry held out his hand. One of the swords disappeared in a flash of flame, reappearing to drop into his hand. Lifting up his arm, Harry hurled the fire at an approaching group of spectres. The fire arced out, severing the moving darkness that was his enemy into two.

At the same time, several of the spectres leapt at him, their yellow eyes gleaming dangerously in the shadows of their forms. Harry made a gesture with his wand and the swords sliced through them, turning them into a thick vapour that slowly settled to the ground. On the other side of the hall, a giant beam of light captured a dozen more

of the animated darkness, sucking them all into a large, ornate mirror that had appeared out of nowhere. Dumbledore rapped the mirror with his wand and it shattered, bending and twisting in upon itself and returning to nothingness- taking the spectres with it.

With a sharp gesture of Harry's hand, the swords of Hellfire swivelled on their axis and shot through the air. Vesper's demonic form shrieked as she dove to avoid them, but they darted in after her in an amazing display of aerial aerobatics. Harry had to admit that Vesper put on a fantastic display as she tried to avoid the circling and darting blades of Hellfire. Perhaps, had she not been wounded, she might have been able to avoid them. Unfortunately for her, she couldn't. The first sword slammed into her from the side, lancing into her wings in a perfect intercept collision. The second and third swords sliced through her chest, the fourth removing her large tail completely.

Vesper screamed in her demonic form as the swords burned her to a crisp, and Harry watched dispassionately as she sagged and fell through the air. She struck the ground at great speed, still impaled on the fiery swords as Harry strode over towards her, a look of dark satisfaction on his face. Victory surged through his veins, almost as addictive as Hellfire, as he loomed above her broken and battered body. The swords of flame shimmered and disappeared before his eyes and Vesper reverted back to her human form, burned, bleeding and butchered before him. Harry smiled at her and crouched down beside her.

"I'll be quick," he whispered into her good ear, absently stroking the remains of her tattered hair. "You bought this on yourself, Vesper. You should have left us alone. Instead, you chose to ally with my enemy against me. But despite everything, do you know why I'm about to kill you?"

He stood up and lifted the Sword of the Cross up above his head. It flared with silver fire as Harry smiled down at her coldly.

"It's because Meciels still pissed that you helped burn her silk sheets," Harry finished, and brought the sword down on her neck.

Steel met flesh, then stone, and the light in Vesper's cruel yellow eyes died. Harry lifted the blood-stained sword and watched with hard eyes as Vesper slackened and went limp. There was a soft, tinkling noise as a small, silver coin popped out of Vesper's mouth and rolled along the ground. It hit Harry's foot and fell to the side with a soft clink.

"Hello, Vesper," Harry said with a wicked smile, bending down to pick up the coin. "I hope you enjoy the smell of raw sewerage, because that's what you're going to smell for a very long time."

The coin seemed to throb in his hand and Harry chuckled as he placed it in his robes, suddenly feeling exuberant. He grinned, ignoring the aches and pains of his own body, and glanced down towards the other end of the atrium where Voldemort and Dumbledore were still at it.

"Better go help the old man, no?" He asked out loud.

'Together, you'd be more than a match for Voldemort,' Meciell agreed.

Harry disappeared and reappeared near the remains of the fountain of magical brethren with a soft crack. He glanced around, noting the severe damage to the floors and walls. The magical fountain had been torn asunder, gallons of water pumping out onto the ground, while fires raged all over the battlefield. Neville was still hiding behind the giant statue of the witch, while Harry spotted Bellatrix crouched up against a wall, bound and gagged.

"Hey, Dumbledore!" Harry yelled cheerfully, raising his wand and levelling it at Voldemort. "Are you still playing around with this loser?"

"Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore greeted calmly, ignoring the blood that trickled down his face and into his long beard. He straightened up and smiled politely. "Are you done with Lady Vesper already?"

"It's a bit hard to be a lady without your head," Harry boasted, lifting his blood-stained sword to his shoulders. "So, want some help with fuck-face over there?"

He turned to face Voldemort, whose robes were in tatters. Although he seemed to be healing at a highly accelerated rate, a series of large bruises marked his exposed ribs. Nonetheless, it looked like he could still fight with his considerable powers without any problems.

"Very well, then," Voldemort spoke coldly. "I see my time here has been wasted. Once more, my ally has let me down." He glanced at Harry for a second. "It is fortunate for her that she has died here today. I would not have forgiven such a failure again."

He twirled his wand in his fingers and stared at both Harry and Dumbledore with derisively, while lifting his other hand to his mouth. He blew onto his hand, made an odd motion with his wand and suddenly a massive fiery serpent shot up in a spectacular blaze of billowing flames. Intense heat smashed at Harry and Dumbledore, the former taking it all in stride while the latter seemed to struggle with it.

Harry flicked his own wand and, concentrating, summoned his own fiery colossus. A giant column of flame shot up from the ground with a deafening boom and a hazily defined bone-wrym stormed forward and met the serpent's strike head on. As soon as they touched, the fiendfyre became golden flame that rippled across the ceiling, shattering bricks. *Priori Incantatem* started to form between the two brother wands, until it abruptly ended. The air flickered with tiny swirling sparks and a flash of blinding light temporarily obscured Harry's view. He looked back a moment later, but Voldemort and his servant were both gone.

The duel was over.

"Coward," Harry said scornfully. He tucked his wand into his robes and turned to face Dumbledore, noting the wounds on the old wizard. "You look like shit."

"Thank you," said Dumbledore, a touch dryly. "I daresay that I believe I did rather well for a man of my age. I'm quite happy that you've managed to defeat Vesper as well, although you look, and pardon my language, like 'shit' yourself."

“Flesh wound,” Harry dismissed with a wave of his hand. He winced and gingerly touched his chest, feeling for the massive internal damage he knew he had. “Er...mostly, anyway. I think I need to grow a new spleen.”

“Can you do that?” Dumbledore inquired, looking honestly intrigued.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry answered with a nod. “Easy as Avada Kedavra.”

Dumbledore nodded sagely and, together, the two warriors stood silently amidst the ruins of the atrium. It had been, more or less, completely levelled by the battle that had raged within it. Fires still raged in various corners while the gleaming wooden floorboards had all been torn out, to the point where Harry didn't think that there was a single safe passage from the fireplaces to the elevator. A security guard desk was burning in blaze of deathly green flames, while the fountain was cracked and broken, gushing up water. The statues lay all over the ground, torn to pieces by the unknown but obviously powerful spells.

“See, this is what victory's meant to look like,” Harry crowed, gesturing out at the atrium. “You see all that and you just have to think to yourself, “Fuck, I went through all of that and I'm still alive?” By the way, did you know that there's about a dozen or so wizards here at the moment, hiding by the fireplace in the corner?”

“That was strangely poetic,” Dumbledore answered and sighed wearily. “And yes, I am aware of them. Minister Fudge and a few Aurors of the advanced guard. They arrived right at the very end of the battle and quite likely wondering whether or not they should attempt to arrest us.”

“Huh,” Harry uttered, He scratched his head and grinned. “I could take them.”

“Oh, no need,” Dumbledore said, and his usual cheerful merriness washed over his aged face. He lifted his head and called out, “Good evening, Minister Fudge.”

There was a sudden bunch of muttering and whisperings at the end of the hallway. Harry rolled his eyes. Suddenly the atrium was alive with sound once more as wizards and witches apparated in by the dozens. The fires in the fireplaces flared with green light as more wizards ducked into the atrium, all of them staring at the damage in shock.

“Minister!” somebody yelled. “What happened here?”

“It was Dumbledore!” yelled the portly man, wringing the green bowler’s hat in his hand nervously and pointing a shaking hand at the venerable Headmaster. “Him... and Potter... and...and...You-Know-Who! You-Know-Who was here!”

“Oh dear,” Dumbledore said as the atrium burst out in a frantic buzz of hysterical shouting. “I should intervene here and take care of this, before it gets out of hand. Harry, take this,” he reached into his robes and pulled out the glowing orb, “and go to my office. I will be there shortly. We need to talk.”

“Alright,” Harry muttered, snatching the orb and glancing around at the wizards, many of them who were wearing Auror robes. He twirled on his feet and disappeared, leaving Dumbledore and Neville alone with the Ministry workers.

A/N: The second-last chapter of the Denarian Knight. Some may know that I've already began penning the sequel. I've got quite a bit planned already, including but not limited to:

- Harry undertaking the dirtier tasks of the Order of Phoenix

- Harry striking back at key figures of the Order of the Blackened Denarius, moving to destroy Meciell's most hated foes once and for all

Obviously, it won't be focussing on Hogwarts much at all. He will visit from time to time, with good incentive, but nothing like the Denarian Knight. If this story was mostly about characterisation and plot development with a tad of action, the next story will be mostly about action and tying up loose ends, with a tad of character development to round everything off.

Harry strolled- well, limped, through the darkened halls of Hogwarts with a little bit of bounce in his step and a wide smile plastered across his face. Having walked all the way from Hogsmeade, he was quite relieved to see that the halls were completely deserted. Frankly, he didn't know if could put up with any of the prefects- or worse, the Inquisitorial Squad- without killing a few of them. Then again, he was in a good mood.

Scratch that, he was in a bloody fantastic mood.

Harry grinned at nothing in particular, taking particular care to make sure that none of his blood dripped to the ground and removing it with a quick flick of his wand if it did. It had been, without a doubt, a fabulous night for him. Better than the night Maeve had crawled into his bed. Vesper was dead, the Death Eaters had been broken and Harry had had a hell of a time generally blowing the shit out of everything that moved- and a few things that didn't.

"I wonder if this is what love feels like?" Harry mused, turning a corridor and approaching the Headmasters office. He paused and glanced down the other hallway, a puzzled frown on his face as something occurred to him. "After all this, I gotta wonder what happened to Umbridge."

“Showing concern?” Meciél asked lightly, suddenly appearing by Harry’s side in corporeal form.

“Hardly,” Harry snorted, turning his head to stare at her lazily. “If she was still alive, I just might consider asking Amaris to let me have a few rounds at her and...whoa.”

“What?” Meciél questioned, looking faintly puzzled.

“Meciél, you’re glowing,” Harry told her frankly, coming to a stop and staring at her with surprise.

“If you make a pregnancy joke...” Meciél started in exasperation.

“No, I really mean... you’re glowing,” Harry said helplessly. He gestured at her at her form.

True to his words, Meciél’s illusionary body, which Harry found naturally radiant, did seem to have an aura of dim light surrounding it. Her white and grey silk was spotted with patches of fiery light, while there seemed to be a ball of inner fire nestled between her breasts. The whole affect gave her seemingly-untainted form a dangerous edge.

“I apologise,” Meciél said, her lips curving. Without a move on her part, the fire around her disappeared and she stared at Harry almost sheepishly.

“Feeling...uh...happy?” Harry questioned. A cocky grin swept his face and he folded his arms. “Meciél, I know the whole ‘bloodied and battered’ look looks sexy on me, especially with the streak of dried blood down my face. Seriously, I should thank Vesper for it. I mean, I am hot as hell, especially with the way my tattered robes reveal those tantalising glimpses of my muscular chest, so that you just want to run your hands all over it and use your tongue to tease...”

“That’s a relief,” Meciél interrupted dryly. “For a moment, I was certain that you were trying to make some kind of lewd sexual innuendo. However, it seems that you were just indulging in a little self-foreplay.

I can always retreat into your mind and let you have a little bit of privacy with yourself. I'm sure your penis won't mind."

Harry gaped at her with an incredulous smile.

"Wow," he uttered, picking up the pace again. He gave Meciél a sideways glance. "You really are in a good mood. You look like you've just had a ravishing shag, except I think I might have noticed if you had."

"Ah, my beloved," Meciél said affectionately. Harry blinked at the use of a rather old nickname and was astonished when she reached over and stroked his cheek tenderly. "You have no idea how happy you have made me tonight."

"What, by killing Vesper?" Harry asked confusedly. "Did you hate her that much?"

"Oh, beloved," Meciél started softly. Her beautiful smile dimmed and a great surging fury arose from her presence in his mind. "You truly have no idea how much I despised that woman, of the crimes she committed against me.

Hatred arose from her as she talked, as vast as the stars and mingled in with an odd sense of regret and pain. It threatened to overwhelm him until he forced it back, one of the few times that he blocked Meciél from most of his mind.

"Shit!" Harry cursed. "A little warning would be nice."

Meciél's image took a deep breath and the fury abated. She smiled at him calmly, but her silver eyes still glinted with dark emotion.

"Nonetheless, that chapter is finished for now," Meciél said quietly. "Vesper is defeated, although others remain."

"Others?"

"We will speak of it later," Meciél said. She gave him a radiant smile as they stopped in front of the stone gargoyle. "I suggest that you just worry about how you will open the entrance to Dumbledore's..."

The stone gargoyle suddenly made a low gravelly noise, titling its head and staring down at Harry with blank eyes. After a moment, it jumped aside, revealing the curving staircase to the Headmaster's office.

"Meciél, Meciél, Meciél," Harry sighed as he trudged up the staircase. "I have just defeated one of the most powerful Denarians in all the land. Why must you doubt my power so?"

Meciél arched her eyebrow and looked amused as Harry carelessly opened the door at the top of the staircase and strode in. The office looked exactly how it had the last time he had been in there, although a lot of the spindly instruments were still and unmoving.

"My word!" One of the portraits exclaimed as Harry came into full view. "What happened to you?"

"Oh, this? Dumbledore was a little more aggressive than I thought," Harry retorted. He eyed the pudgy wizard with a mocking grin. "It didn't really matter in the end, though."

"What's this about Dumbledore?" one of the other portraits spoke up in a squeaky voice. "Is he back?"

"No, he's dead," Harry said casually.

There was dead silence amongst the portraits.

"What?" one of them, a tall, ginger-haired man with a very bushy moustache. "Dumbledore is dead? How?"

"I killed him and made it look like an accident," Harry said, directing a dark smile over at the paintings. "Now I'm here to steal all of the good shit he kept hidden here."

“How dare you...” one of the portraits said heatedly, whilst the others just stared down at Harry with horror.

Harry started snickering and the portrait realised that he had been had. He glared at Harry and huffed pompously.

“You’re a nasty little boy, aren’t you?” he spat out.

“Yep!” Harry said cheerfully. “Now shut up, before I burn you.”

Ignoring more splutters of indignation, Harry pulled out the prophecy orb from the tattered remains of his robes and stared at it thoughtfully. It glowed with a dim, white light and he stared at it as Meciél peered over his shoulder, stopping only to give him an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

“I could get used to this,” Harry said, absently touching his cheek. His smile faded and he uttered a small ‘huh’ as he spotted the engravings on the side of the orb. “HP... NL... I wonder what they could stand for. Somebody’s been keeping secrets, Meciél.”

“Perhaps it’s time we found out what those secrets were,” Meciél said, more than a little seductively.

She nipped him on the ear and Harry started, staring at her with wide eyes. The Fallen smiled at him naughtily, making Harry shake his head in a mixture of bafflement and amusement.

“If you get like this every time I kill somebody you don’t like then they’re going to arrest me for genocide,” Harry said slyly. He turned back to the sphere and grew serious. “As for hearing what’s inside...well, we shouldn’t. This isn’t ours. We didn’t...and he did say...”

He trailed off as Meciél gave him a disbelieving look and chuckled.

“Nah, not even I believe the shit that’s coming out of my mouth,” he said with a grin. “Do your thing, Meciél.”

Meciel wrapped her hands around Harry, moving them so that they encircle the sphere. Tendrils of magic shot through him, blazing Hellfire cracking open the charms on the glowing orb. An old woman's harsh voice filled his ear as she chanted the prophecy into his mind. When it was finished, Harry lowered his arms and looked pensive.

Some time later, Dumbledore arrived in his office through his fireplace, walking through the green fire with casual ease. He had obviously done a little bit of repair work on himself, since he looked like he had come from the robe shop rather than a battle. Amidst the genial greetings of the portrait, Dumbledore stared across his desk.

Sitting in the Headmaster's chair was Harry, the Sword of the Cross laid against his knees as he propped his feet up against the desk. He was idly twirling his wand between two fingers and was staring at Dumbledore coldly. He raised his arm and showed the older wizard the prophecy orb, which had grown dull- it's light gone.

"So, about that chat," Harry said coolly.

"I understand that you are feeling upset now, Harry," Dumbledore said. He stood by Fawkes perch, stroking the beautiful plumage of the Summer Fae, while Harry leaned back in the Headmaster's chair and fixed the older man with a penetrating gaze.

"Upset, not so much," Harry admitted. "Annoyed- nah, I'm not annoyed. Am I angry? Hmm, maybe. Though, I think the words best used to describe the emotions I am feeling is somewhere between the lines of 'You fucking manipulative arsehole!' and 'Avada Kedavra!'"

Harry broke off and took a deep breath, struggling to contain the very loud and obscene words that threatened to burst out of him. After seeing everything he had tonight, including the true extent of the Headmaster's powers, anger was not an emotion that he wanted present in this room. Well, not on Dumbledore's end, anyway. He supposed he could afford to be a little angry.

"It does make sense, though," Harry mused thoughtfully. He threw the prophecy sphere, now spent and useless, up into the air and casually caught it. "I always wondered why you gave me that tome of spells. I could be your damn enemy, given all that you know about me, and there you were, handing me the keys to a tank- a very big tank, with a huge canon... that can breathe fire."

"Perhaps, had you been a normal child, I might have tried to spare you the burden of your destiny," Dumbledore said heavily. He stroked his beard and turned his dull gaze upon Harry, his eye rather remorseful behind his half-moon glasses. "But let us be honest. You are anything but a child. The Fallen you have consorted with has turned you to the darkness. You indulge- no, delight in the temptations of the shadow. You enjoy the fight. You are, to be frank, the perfect weapon to be used against Lord Voldemort, prophecy or not."

"So you're saying that you would have given me as much leeway if I hadn't been prophesized to be your arch-enemy's destroyer?" Harry asked, and scoffed harshly when Dumbledore remained silent. "No, I didn't think so. Although...a weapon?" He cocked his head. "Don't think I've been called that before."

He pondered the fact for a few moments, remaining silent until Dumbledore sighed wearily.

"Perhaps I had best explain from the start," he said seriously.

"For a bit of a twist, let's try the middle," Harry remarked dryly. "That way, you can get past the 'Oh, I'm so sorry, Harry' stage and all that bullshit, and start telling me what I really want to know."

"Very well," Dumbledore replied. His voice became brisk, adopting a business-like edge as clasped his hands behind his back and began. "Some years ago, just shortly after you were born, I was witness to the prophecy you just heard. A prospective candidate for the Divination position here at Hogwarts came to me, requesting an interview. Naturally, once she had given the prophecy of such sensitive nature, she was granted the opening. She resides here

today, rarely leaving her tower, partly due to her own eccentricities and partly due to my influence.”

Harry remained silent, listening as Dumbledore went on.

“Unfortunately, the information of the prophecy was leaked,” Dumbledore continued. His eyes were distant, drawn back to days long past and friends long gone. “Lord Voldemort became aware of the prophecy’s content, or at least, a part of it. Regardless, it was enough to put him on guard and he began a frantic search for a child who fit the prophecy. Considering there are few who can claim that they have defied Voldemort once, let alone thrice, it was a short list. In the end, there were two possible candidates who fit all of the criteria- born to parents who had defied Lord Voldemort, born at the end of July.”

“Me,” Harry said flatly. “And Longbottom. Seriously, how fucked would you be right now if Longbottom was the one that the prophecy was talking about? Neville Longbottom, the Boy-Who-Lived. Man, you guys would be screwed.”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore conceded. “Mr Longbottom, while possessing many admirable traits, is not the most skilled wizard to walk these halls. Do consider though, that if you hadn’t been chosen then it is very likely that Neville would possess your potent skills in magic. Fate has a way of ensuring that the playing board is... equal, to say the least.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry muttered.

“Now that Lord Voldemort had correctly deciphered his two potential threats, he needed to eradicate you before you grew older and more powerful and became a threat,” Dumbledore continued. He fixed Harry with a piercing stare. “Your parents, Harry, were on the run because of you. Lord Voldemort did not seek them, although I am sure that he wished them harm. Rather, he sought you. The deaths of your parents can be wholly attributed to that fact.”

“Are you trying to guilt me?” Harry asked lazily. “Or is this another one of your stupid tests? Get to the point, already!”

Dumbledore stared at Harry, searching for something within the Denarian's eyes that only he knew. Whatever it was that he was looking for, he evidentially didn't find it and he broke off, looking older and more wearied than ever before.

"I'm unaware if you've heard the full story of your parent's demise," Dumbledore said tiredly. "But in the end, Lord Voldemort found them. Having chosen you as the most likely candidate for, I'm sure, his own obscure reasons, he slipped past the defences of the Potter family home on the 31st of October, 1981. Your father confronted him downstairs and a fierce, but ultimately futile, duel erupted. Having murdered your father, Lord Voldemort arose to the second floor and confronted your mother by your cot. Lily, beautiful Lily, refused to let Voldemort have you, even after being spared, so the Dark Lord turned his wand to her. Then... then it was just you and him, the baby and the Dark Lord. It seemed clear on who would win that particular battle."

"Except I didn't lose," Harry said quietly. Dumbledore's visible emotion at telling this story was surprising, as was the strange sensation squeezing at his heart. Green light flashed in his eyes and in the distance, a woman screamed. Harry closed his eyes as Meciél's presence flared in his mind, her heat banishing back those long, distant memories and surrounding his senses in a comforting hug. He opened them, his face emotionless, and gestured for Dumbledore to continue.

"You're right," Dumbledore said quietly. He stroked Fawkes' plumage, apparently pensive. "Nobody knows why Voldemort's Killing Curse rebounded back upon him. Not even I can be certain. Did your Mother's sacrifice constitute as the necessary requirements for lore so ancient that most have forgotten, enabling an earthly protection few could breach? Was it the prophecy, merely twisting events so that certain conditions were fulfilled? You were marked that night, Harry, marked as his equal and denoted by the scar on your forehead. But... the prophecy had not been fulfilled, not completely, and I knew that Lord Voldemort would arise once more. That left me with a rather urgent question. Where do I place the new saviour of the Wizarding World?"

“Obviously, you chose the Dursley’s,” Harry said. Bitterness flooded his voice and a sneer of anger twisted his face. “For the record, that was a bad idea. Those cruel sons-of-bitches were horrible to me. It’s a little wonder I tore them apart, piece by piece, and threw their corpses into the fires of the hell.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said. Regret flashed over his face, making him seem old- too old for the roles that he played. Fawkes’ head rose up and she stared at Dumbledore with obvious concern. She opened her mouth, trilling a few notes that sent shivers down Harry’s spine. Dumbledore smiled and stroked Fawkes affectionately. “Thank you, my old friend.”

“So, you left me at the Dursley’s,” Harry picked up where Dumbledore left, strangely absorbed into this story. Pick at all the man’s flaws a you want, Dumbledore was an excellent story teller. “And after seven years of being abused and neglected, I’m offered a chance to take the road of darkness, damned but free. I take it and... where does that put you?”

“In a very difficult position,” Dumbledore answered grimly. “The day after your supposed death was one of the most hectic times of my life. Everybody wanted to know what had happened, which was a problem as nobody did know what had happened. You and your family were attacked. Powerful, raw dark magic was used. There were no survivors, no indicators as to who might have done it. The consensus was that if you were still alive, then you were too well hidden from us.”

“Damn right I was,” Harry muttered with fierce pride. “Takes more than that to get through Meciél.”

“The days turned into weeks, which turned into months, which turned into a year, and with nothing but futile results, you were eventually proclaimed deceased on your eight birthday,” Dumbledore said. His next words were soft, a confession of sorts. “I mourned- both the loss of the Chosen One and the loss of the innocent little boy, who probably had no idea why he had been murdered.”

"I'm sure you did," Harry muttered sceptically.

"At the same time, the select few in the Department of Mysteries who were aware of the prophecy contacted me," Dumbledore continued. It seemed as this was becoming less of an explanation and more of a confession of sorts as the aged Headmaster unburdened his soul. "It was decided that since you had died before the pre-ordained event, there was a chance that you were not the one the prophecy pertained too- however unlikely that was. As a result, the only other candidate's name was placed down. Neville Longbottom. Alas, this was why he was lured away from Hogwarts. The Spheres are charmed that only those that are named by the prophecy can remove them from their shelves. Those that try regardless – well, their minds never do recover."

"So Neville and the others going to the Ministry of Magic, and subsequently getting their arses kicked, was my fault as well?" Harry asked and rolled his eyes. "Seriously, if you start saying that I'm the father of your daughter's baby or something..."

"A different wizard might feel bothered that his actions, or even his mere presence, have caused great harm to innocents," Dumbledore noted gravely.

"A different wizard would be an idiot then," Harry finished boldly. He stood up from the chair, stretching his arms. Slowly, he started to pace around the room, observing the different trinkets on the walls with interest.

His voice echoed in the silent room as Dumbledore watched him. "I think I can guess what happen next." He turned around and his eyes were cold, despite the arrogant tilt of his lips. "I turn up alive, but I wasn't what you wanted."

"Yes," Dumbledore answered simply. He elaborated. "Your arrival at Hogwarts to protect Ms. Carpenter seemed to me like- quite frankly, fate. Of all the debts you chose to honour, it was that one. Of all the places the debt could have taken you, it brought you here, to Hogwarts. However, not even I could see the possibility of your fall."

“Must have been pissed off,” Harry said conversationally. He played with one of the trinkets, his back turned as he spoke. “All that planning, all that thought, wasted. Your hero, your weapon, becoming the very thing you fought against.”

“I first sought to free you from the snares of the Fallen,” Dumbledore explained, making Harry glance up sharply. “I allowed you to remain here, despite what might have been a very dangerous situation, so that I could observe you, glean something of your ideals and actions. In time, I learnt something very disheartening. You did not want to be freed. You loved her.”

Harry froze, standing still and listening as Dumbledore’s calm voice washed over him.

“That, too, is my folly,” the aged Headmaster sighed. “By keeping your safety paramount in my mind, I ignored the other aspect of all human beings that you desperately needed. It was denied to you for the first seven years of your life and when a chance came to obtain it, you took it at the cost of your soul. I gave you safety, Harry. The Fallen gave you love. I wonder if I shall ever find out which one of us was right.”

“I think it’s pretty clear,” Harry said crisply.

“You’re hardly the most objective person,” Dumbledore responded a tad dryly. His voice became wistful. “No, you are not objective at all. You were strong, in your opinions, in your power, in your selfishness—which, of course, is understandable given your background. Why waste your thoughts on the needs of others when your own needs were so threatened by outside powers? I didn’t know whether your entrapment by the goblet of fire was a good thing or a bad thing. There you were, forced to stay under my eye. However, in doing so you, your hatred towards this institution grew even deeper. However, once the First Task came and went, I knew that your presence here was critical.”

“The Drakon,” Harry said. A ghost of an arrogant grin swept over his face. “The Drakon that knocked you off your arse before I killed it.”

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore, a faint twinkle in his eye. He stroked his beard. "I will admit, I was surprised at the presence of one of Beasts of Old. Surprise, Harry, can be more critical to a fight than any skill or power alone. Temporarily subdued, I awoke to see the last of your battle and I was immediately horrified. Winter's Ice stretched across the Stadium, its stench noticeable to those with the proper skill. That alone brought two more concerns to the ever-increasing pile. Firstly, you had enemies- or the darkness had powerful allies. Bewitching a Drakon is no mean feat; in fact, I would have said that it was impossible under the circumstances. Secondly, you had just become the pawn of the Winter Court."

"Fawkes probably blew an arse-feather over that," Harry said. The Phoenix turned its beady black eyes on Harry, who shrugged them off and smiled lazily.

"I am still unsure as to Maeve's motives on this. The Faerie Courts are forbidden, for the most part, to interfere in the Wizarding World. There are accords and treaties far older than you or I. Lady Maeve cannot break them," Dumbledore mused thoughtfully. He stood there silently, his mind adrift, while Harry waited impatiently for the old man to continue.

"Okay," he broke in after a few moments. "Seriously, I didn't need your life story after you met me. I think I know where this part leads onto anyway."

"The Resurrection of Voldemort," Dumbledore said grimly. "When your substantial presence disappeared from the school grounds, I immediately knew that the dark forces had made their move. Yet I was powerless to do anything, except wait- and wait I did. They were very anxious moments for me, Harry. If you died there, then everything would have been for naught."

"Hey, don't get too teary on me," Harry muttered sarcastically, but motioned for Dumbledore continue.

"I have to admit that when you returned, I felt more relieved than I had for sixty years," Dumbledore said. A wry smile twisted his face as he walked from Fawkes's perch, moving to reclaim his seat. "Amidst

the sadness of Viktor Krum's death, I was satisfied. Voldemort had revealed himself. He had taken the next step towards the fulfilment of the prophecy. I was alarmed to hear of his bargains with those who walk within the Outer Walls, for Voldemort had showed little patience in serving higher beings. But of all the new you brought me that night, there was one even that made me truly ecstatic."

Harry's eyes darted to the Sword of the Cross lying across Dumbledore's desk and Dumbledore nodded, following the young Denarian's gaze.

"You picked up the Sword of the Cross Fidelacchius," Dumbledore said softly. His hand rose up to stroke along the gleaming blade of the sword, his eyes intent. "It is a holy weapon, perhaps one the holiest. It, with its kin, represents the divine force that works on this world even now. Fidelacchius- the sword of embodied faith, wielded by a Denarian, the most faithless of them all. It is a strange paradox, yes, but one that seems to work well for you. Once you had claimed this sword for yourself, I allowed myself a glimmer of hope. You were not lost, not yet. You had fallen into darkness, yes, I could see that. But you had not fallen to evil."

"Evil and darkness?" Harry repeated slowly. He stared at Dumbledore coldly. "I don't see a difference."

"To my mind, there is a very clear distinction between the two," Dumbledore answered patiently. "It has always been my belief- it still is, to be honest- that it is not our heritage or our powers or our skills that label us. It is our choices that truly define what we are, both the big choices and the smaller, seemingly inconsequential choices. You, who have no qualm in murdering a defeated opponent or killing one who has wronged you, willingly helped an abused child at Christmas. You, who find your classmates to be of little worth, will leap to their defence."

"I made a promise," Harry said uncomfortably. He was scowling as he waved off Dumbledore's next words. "Who are you trying to convince here, me, or yourself? Besides, we're off topic. I want to know more about the prophecy. What's this power that I supposedly have?"

“At another time, had you been- well, normal, I would have suggested your humanity, your mercy, your emotions,” Dumbledore replied quietly. “Voldemort does not understand them, his own stripped away by the countless attempts at seeking power and immortality. However, you yourself thrive and take power from the emotions that Voldemort hold dear. Rage. Hatred. Anger. Fear. They strengthen you as they do him.”

“Humanity is a power?” Harry asked. He snorted and broke out into a mocking chuckle that echoed in the silent office. The horizon was brightening through the window as dawn approached.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, smiling faintly. “Lord Voldemort believes much the same as you. However, I will not argue the point with you today. Suffice to say, I do not know what your power is. It could be your bond, with the Fallen Miciel. It could be the Hellfire she gives you to warp your spells into unimaginable strength. Voldemort does not possess that power, thankfully. It could be a variety of different other powers that she has granted you. For example, your regeneration skills are very impressive. A lesser being, human or not, would have been killed. I’m quite sure I wouldn’t have been able to shrug off some of the damage that Vesper dealt you quite so easily.”

“I suppose,” Harry said thoughtfully. He stood there in silence as the first rays of sunlight peaked through the window, casting a beautiful glow of the horizon outside. “So, me or Voldemort. One or the other, huh?”

“It does seem that way,” Dumbledore noted.

“Well, I had planned on killing him,” Harry acknowledged. “I didn’t exactly need a prophecy to figure that out. Although,” he started, his words becoming bitter. “I am really getting sick of being bound into things I don’t want.”

He turned to stare at Dumbledore, his expressive green eyes flickering as wreaths of Hellfire formed around his corona.

“Very sick of it,” he finished tightly.

"I am sorry, Harry," Dumbledore said, and he did look genially remorseful. "If this was a burden I could take upon myself, know that I would have done so at the instant it became available. But I can't. This is your role, your destiny. Lord Voldemort will only be defeated by one man. It will not be me."

"So I'm the instrument of the Order of Phoenix," Harry concluded softly, his voice rather calm for what he was feeling. "I suppose that makes sense. A Host of Hell, the tool of Heaven, the axe of the Order. Am I that useable?"

"Fate seems to think so?"

"Fate can kiss my sculpted, chiselled arse," Harry snapped. His fingers, which had been toying with one of Dumbledore's trinkets on the shelves, closed around it and crushed it in a shower of sparks. Harry took no notice and glared at Dumbledore furiously.

"I do have to applaud you for holding your temper as long as you did," Dumbledore noted calmly. "Why, I half-expected you to start tearing down my shelves, although it seems that I will have to construct a new Scrying Pyramid."

"I suppose that's one skill I'm getting out of all of this," Harry growled through gritted teeth. He took a deep breath and visibly calmed himself down, closing his eyes and relaxing. When he opened his eye, he gave Dumbledore a brittle smile. "Patience. I've gotten very good at it."

"I've noticed," said Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eye. "Severus hasn't visited the hospital wing for quite some time now."

"Alright, I'm outta here," Harry said after a few moments of silence.

He approached the door, his hand on the knob, and looked back. "But let me make one thing clear. When I go after Voldemort, it won't be because of you. It won't be because of the prophecy. It won't be because of fate! I will not be the Order's axe." He paused and smiled coldly. "You're right. I am a weapon, a very powerful weapon. But it's not the will of Dumbledore's that I'll kill for. I am not the one that'll

unquestionably slaughter those that have provoked your wrath- or worse, your pity. In the end, Voldemort will die because, despite everything that's happened... “

He leaned forward intently, his eyes practically glowing. “He burned Meciél’s silk sheets.” He drew back and smiled lazily, almost daringly. “That’s the only reason I need.”

He swept out of the doorway in a dramatic flourish, bounding down the staircase and leaving the aged Headmaster sitting alone behind his desk. Dumbledore, who looked older than ever, sighed wearily and stroked his beard as he glanced over at Fawkes, a wry smile on his face.

“I suppose that went as well as it could have,” he admitted.

Suddenly footsteps pounded on the staircase and Harry swept back into the room, his piercing green eyes sweeping across Dumbledore.

“I forgot the sword,” Harry muttered, looking disgruntled. He strode across the room, snatched it off Dumbledore’s desk and strode back, hovering at the doorway. A scowl came over his face. “And now I’ve ruined my perfectly good dramatic exit as well. Damn it! And the day was going so well for me.”

He was already gone by the time that Dumbledore had started chuckling.

Harry ducked back into the Gryffindor Tower and grabbed his belongings before he started for the Entrance Hall. On the way, Meciél appeared before him, looking strangely pensive.

“Did you mean what you said?” she asked quietly.

“About what?” Harry asked, glancing over his shoulder to look at her.

“About serving my will,” Meciél answered.

“Meciel, I’m the most pussy-whipped guy at Hogwarts, which sucks because I’m actually not getting any of it,” Harry said frankly, but not without humour. “We should rectify that, don’t you think?”

“You did serve my will tonight,” Meciel told him proudly. She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and smiled beautifully down at him. “I will admit that I have an agenda, but I was going to wait until you were more powerful before pushing it at you. Now, though, with the Blackened Order of the Denarius in disarray and your powers at an unrivalled peak than ever before, I believe that it will soon be time.”

“Time for what?”

“Soon,” Meciel said gently. She faded away as her illusion left his side, disappearing in a burst of soft light and fragrance. “We will talk soon. For now, rest. You’ve earned it.”

“Cryptic bitch,” Harry muttered with a scowl, but a silly little grin played on his lips. As he was turning a corner, he paused. The Hospital Wing was down the other way and before he knew it he was striding towards it.

White, pristine and smelling like strange potion fumes, the hospital wing was occupied by all of the students who had visited her Department of Mysteries late last night. He passed Neville and resisted the urge to whack him in the balls.

“How could he have not seen a trap?” he grumbled under his breath.

He passed the rest of the students, noting that most of them seemed relatively unharmed and were resting peacefully, and approached the bed in the corner. He could hear soft, pitiful noises coming from it and scowled. The bed had been closed off by large, white curtains, but Harry whipped them open and stared down at the occupant

Amanda lay there, heavily bandaged. Her face was deathly pale, her cheeks flushed and her eyes rimmed with red. He watched as a fat, pearly tear slide down her cheek as she gazed back up at him in surprise, her eye haunted and shocked.

“What are you snivelling about?” Harry asked roughly, closing the curtains behind him and not looking too impressed.

“I killed a man,” Amanda said softly, the emotion in her voice more than making up for her lack of words.

“Oh, here we go,” Harry sighed in annoyance. “Kill one person and it’s like the world’s come to an end.”

“I wanted to kill him,” Amanda confessed to him, her horror at the thought clouding her face. “I desperately wanted to see him die in pain.”

“No shit,” Harry deadpanned. “He was torturing you, you idiot.”

“I liked killing him,” she confided, as if he was barely hearing Harry speak. Harry was silent, staring down at the broken girl before him with emotionless eyes. She stared back at him, another tear rolling down her cheek “Watching him burn was one of the best moments of my life. What does that make me?” She asked with a whisper. “Does it make me like them? Does it make me like...you?”

“Like me?” Harry repeated and rolled his eyes. “You wish. Okay, brat, pay attention. There is a single key difference between us, something that will probably never change no matter what happens in our lives.”

“What is it?” Amanda asked softly.

“You cry where I laugh,” Harry finished flatly.

Amanda became silent, pondering his words carefully. Harry fidgeted as the silence spread on for a full minute, before he had had enough.

“Yeah, well, whatever,” he muttered. “I just making sure nobody had gotten themselves killed. Made a vow, you know.”

He turned to leave when something snatched at his hand. He glanced back and saw that Amanda clutching his hand with hers, a desperate look on her face.

“What?” he snapped in irritation.

“Stay,” she breathed.

Harry blinked, and a lecherous grin came over his face. “In front of all your friends?” he questioned incredulously and chuckled lowly. “I didn’t know you were that kinky, Amanda. But hey, who am I to judge?”

Amanda rolled her eyes and managed a weak giggle, her battered body wracking with laughter. It subsided after a few seconds and she looked back at Harry warmly.

“Just stay for a bit,” she pleaded. “I’ll promise I won’t cry.”

“Better not,” Harry snorted, but sat down at the edge of her bed as she lay back. Her hand remained in his and as she clutched it tightly.

“You saved my life again,” she whispered, her voice muffled by her pillow. Harry was silent. “That’s twice I owe you now. You saved my life, and you saved the lives of my friends. How can I ever repay you?”

“I can think of a few ways,” Harry muttered lewdly.

“Be careful, Harry,” Amanda breathed, her eyes fluttering shut. She was on the verge of sleep when the next words escaped her lips. “One day, I just might say... yes.”

Her hand became lax and Harry let it go quietly. He was silent as he stood up and stalked out of the hospital wing. Hogwarts was quiet, for the time being, but Harry knew from personal experience that it would become a madhouse of noise and people in little less than thirty minutes. It was time to go.

He strode across the Entrance Hall, his footsteps echoing loudly in the empty hallways, and paused just as he reached the large doors leading outside.

“About time you showed up,” Harry drawled.

Amaris appeared from the shadows of the Great Hall. Clad in her white dress and sandals, she walked up to stand by Harry's side as she looked at her father inquisitively.

"I trust the battle went well?" she asked quietly

"Quite well," Harry answered, and grinned. He opened the doors and stepped outside. A cold breeze hit his face as he let the doors slam behind him. "Better than well, actually."

"I am pleased for you," Amaris said rather emotionlessly, but Harry could decipher the sincerity in her voice.

"Good for you," Harry said, and ruffled her hair affectionately. Together, they strode across the grounds of Hogwarts, their voices drifting softer and softer as they left the majestic castle behind them. "Hey, tell me, how much heat can a Winter Fae take?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ever heard of a place called Hawaii?"

It was cold.

No, freezing described it better. Harry shivered and rubbed his tanned arms as goosebumps sprouted all over his bare skin as an icy gust of wind whipped at his face. The sun was blazing furiously through the open window, even as greenish-blue ice crept over his five-star hotel, seeping into the walls and carpet.

"I'll have to skip town after this," Harry muttered to Meciél, who throbbed within his mind in agreement.

He stared back at the shining hues of light forming in the centre of his room. A vertical slit suspended in the air, almost transparent, was the source of the low temperatures and painfully-cold breeze. It hovered there for a second, before rapidly expanding and shimmering to reveal a portal to an ice wasteland. Harry smelled Winter Power, a stench of decaying plants and new-formed frost, as a figure emerged from the portal to the Nevernever.

Maeve, the Winter Lady, youngest of the Unseelie Queens and the mother of Harry's child, smiled coolly at the Denarian as she entered his high-priced hotel room. Her pale, radiant features looked as if they could have been carved from the very ice she wielded as she absently ran a hand through her hair, dyed dreadlocks in a mixture of deep lavender, pale blues and greens and pure white.

"Harry," Maeve said, caressing the word on her tongue and smiling wickedly.

Harry shivered, and not because of the cold, and forced himself not to stare at the white shirt that stretched across her bust, or the ripped leather pants that showed off more of Maeve's thigh than Harry found comfortable.

It wasn't that he was averse to her looks, it was just that he didn't know what it would cost for him to move on her. Last time, she had demanded his firstborn as payment, not even concerned that she would be the one who would have to carry it. This time, who knows what she would ask.

"Maeve," Harry responded curtly.

Amaris, by his side, moved forward. She was clad in her simple white dress and her dark hair flowed freely behind her small back. Her green eyes, a mixture between Maeve's strange canted, feline green eyes and Harry's won, were emotionless. The eight year old came to stand by her mother, her head bowed in unconscious servitude to the Winter Lady.

"As you can tell, she's still alive," Harry said dryly. He folded his arms over his bare chest and stared at Maeve challengingly. "Do you have any problems with my treatment of her yet?"

"No," Maeve responded softly. She stroked her daughter's head like one would pet a dog. Amaris froze and remained still as her mother idly played with her hair. "I have no problems with that at all."

"Okay then," Harry said awkwardly, glancing away from Maeve and Amaris. He cleared his throat and looked back. "Well, I didn't come to Hawaii to freeze my balls off, so I'm heading back out to the beach."

"Fine," Maeve said, a strange, inhuman smile playing on her lip. Her eyes ran up and down Harry's body and she licked her lip. "But there are other ways to ward off the cold." She leaned forward tantalisingly, her eyes meeting Harry's. "And I know all of them," she whispered softly.

"Could you try not to act like a complete whore in front of my daughter?" Harry asked in exasperation.

Meciel's presence flooded his mind, shielding him from the invasive glammers and mind-twisting spells that appealed to his baser urges. Harry turned to go and paused at the doorway.

"Don't bother putting spells on the room or anything," he said. "I'm not coming back. Amaris?"

"Yes, Father?" Amaris spoke up quietly.

“Just...” Harry trailed off and scratched his head. “Ah, whatever. Later, kid.”

“Goodbye, Father,” Amaris said quietly.

Maeve watched the interaction between father and daughter with glittering eyes as Harry shut the door behind him and left. Mother and daughter stood silently, oblivious to the squeals and laughter of those outside the resort.

“Did my plan work?” Maeve asked Amaris, who nodded dutifully.

“Yes, Mother, I believe so,” the half-fae responded quietly.

“So he cares for you?” Maeve pressed.

“He might love me,” Amaris answered, making Maeve smile in delight and stroke her daughter’s head once more.

“Good work,” praised Maeve, her strange smile still present on her face. “Unfortunately, your work has been for naught. The Host of Meciel is quickly proving to be unsuited for my plans, so I have begun to make other plans.”

She turned and strode back into the portal to the Nevernever, her daughter following obediently behind her. Amaris’ skin tingled as she passed through the expertly-made portal and into the barren wasteland of ice and snow.

A dark figure awaited them, clad in the robes of a wand-wizard.

“Amaris,” Maeve purred. “Meet the one who will give me what I want.”

The figure stared down at Amaris with gleaming eyes and the little girl unconscious shuddered.

“Hello, child.”

A/N: This is the final chapter of The Denarian Knight. Keep an eye out for the Denarian Lord, which will be out before you know it. The

usual thanks to DarkLordPotter, including Jon, Nuhuh, Taure, Oz, Warlocke, Dakatim and the countless other's who took the time to help me refine each chapter through spell-checks, finding plot-holes and sometimes just going 'you really stuffed up here- fix it!'. I suppose I should put in a few disclaimers, like how I don't own Harry Potter or the Dresden Files and how this is a non-profit piece of fan work that has, if anything, benefited the original authors since I'm always getting reviews along the lines of 'your story made me go and buy the set of the Dresden Files- Thank you!' However, I do own all the funny lines that Harry says.

Well, some of them, anyway.